

George

A comedic short story

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George trudged home. Cold drizzle flecked his face and seeped into his chainmail.

At least he was lucky to have his armour—the army could have taken it back when they booted him and his friends out for one too many episodes of high jinks.

The dirt road was turning to mud. It could only be worse if the snow came.

The Old Crone had forewarned of snow.

The Old Crone had also prophesied last month that the sun would turn to petals and fall to earth—and that turned out to be horse manure.

Dusk was falling. Flickering lights peeked through doors and windows along the side street of the village.

As George passed one house, inside, one shadow lunged at another. A whip flayed.

He stopped and clasped the handle of his sword.

The whip came down again.

He darted closer to the house, slunk along the wall, and peered around the doorway. His eyes widened in shock. The helpless maiden was barely clothed, rudely tied, and at the mercy of a masked man whose arm rose aloft again, ready to impart more misery on his innocent victim.

This rescue could save a perfectly awful day, thought George. He drew his sword and barrelled inside.

The man froze. His exposed eyes flared. ‘Get out! What do you... George?’

George recognised the man’s short, paunchy stature and thick accent. ‘Theodore?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘What am *I* doing? Why are you beating this poor woman? I should run you through.’

‘She asked for it.’

George assessed the woman’s demeanour. He tried not to evaluate her womanliness but failed. It reminded him that it had been too long since...

‘Get out, George,’ Theodore hissed.

‘I can’t let you subject this maiden to such torture. Why would you tie her up? It’s evil. It’s wrong.’

‘She asked for it.’

‘What heinous deed did she do? Answer me that!’ George pointed his sword.

‘No deed. She paid me.’

‘She paid you? For this?’ He looked Theodore up and down. ‘To dress up like a grotesque, strip her half-naked and whip her? What kind of—’

Theodore stepped in. ‘It’s a sex thing. Idiot.’

‘This?’

The man rolled his peeping eyes. ‘You need to get out more.’

‘But... but I do get out. Doing good deeds, and saving maidens, and—’

Theodore grabbed George’s hand and helped him sheath the sword. ‘I’m on the clock here, friend. And Ariadne was having fun.’ He sighed. ‘Now I’m going to have to get her all fired up again. For free. Please go.’

George surveyed the scene again. It didn’t make sense, but he turned to leave.

‘And don’t breathe a word to my wife,’ Theodore snapped.

George merely raised an acknowledging hand and sloped out.

Head bowed, he continued down the road. His armour squeaked.

A figure dashed towards him. Again he clutched his sword, then let go when he recognised the woman. She held a shawl over her head against the rain.

She slowed. 'Hello, George.'

She'd spoken to him! His spirits soared. 'Maria. You should be inside before the rain gives you bad humours.'

'That's why I'm running. Rex is waiting for me.'

George's spirits duly sank. Cursed Rex, taking his true love. The lug didn't deserve her.

He painted on a smile. 'Be careful on the road. It's slippery.'

'I will. Goodbye, George.' She gave a weak smile. 'Take care.' She hustled away.

The inn was buzzing when he arrived a few minutes later. He hadn't planned to stop by, but he wanted to, if not drown his sorrows, at least dunk them.

In the corner, his companions were already toasting something. Success, probably, he grouched.

He tugged a coin from his sodden pocket, set it on the counter, and was rewarded with a flagon of ale.

'George!' Alexander beamed a fat smile.

George squelched over to the trio.

'Why the long face, friend?'

George knew Peter didn't care. Peter would only care about George's long face if the reason led to a tale or an adventure in which Peter could triumph and be the talk of the land.

'Women,' George skulked, slapping his tankard on the rough table.

‘Women in general, or women in particular?’ Alexander asked. He usually wouldn’t care—unless George mentioned women. Ideally, specific women. Specific, *single* women whose physique George could describe and whose address he could provide.

‘Both,’ George replied.

‘Maria,’ Alexander said.

‘Maria,’ Peter agreed.

‘I already told you to bury your notions,’ Frederick said.

George sighed. Frederick was right, but that hadn’t stopped a flame flickering in George’s heart for many years.

‘I thought it was destiny, that’s all.’

‘She’s with Rex now,’ Frederick reminded him.

George drifted off into remembrance. ‘We were only kids. Our eyes met over the slurry pit, and, well, I thought that was it.’

‘I hear Rex is hung like a donkey,’ Alexander said. ‘Not as impressive as a horse, obviously.’ He smoothed his tunic.

Frederick rolled his eyes. ‘She’s too artsy for you, George. They are very... unpredictable—painters.’

‘Find someone else,’ Peter suggested.

‘I don’t want someone else,’ George said.

‘You’re an idiot. There are plenty more fish in the sea. Why want the only girl you can’t have?’

‘It’s not like this job isn’t brilliant for meeting girls,’ Alexander said. ‘Why d’you think *I* do it?’

George knew full well why Alexander did it. He sighed. ‘They always find a reason to aggravate my sensibilities. One minute the maiden doesn’t want to be rescued, or she laughs like a donkey, or she’ll only marry a nobleman. Last week, I rescued this maiden—it turns out she faked the whole thing to get attention from her father. Was never in any danger at all.’ He took a long draw on his ale.

‘So why *do* you do it?’

George shrugged. ‘My father did it, and so did his father before him. It’s in the blood.’

Peter pondered for a moment. ‘I thought your grandfather was a weaver.’

‘Well, yes, I suppose he was. He *wanted* to be a knight, but he had a gammy leg.’

‘Ah.’ Alexander nodded sagely.

‘And your dad’s a baker,’ Frederick said.

‘In a sense, he is.’

‘Because he bakes.’

‘He kind of... supports the whole knighting effort by providing sustenance. And he once accidentally stabbed himself in the thigh while sheathing a dagger.’

‘And you haven’t successfully rescued a worthy maiden since—’

‘Too long—alright! It’s not my fault.’

‘You’re nearly as wet as your armour, George. That’s the problem.’ Alexander shot him a knowing look and downed the rest of his ale in one gulp.

Show-off, George mused.

‘You know what I did last week?’ Peter asked with exuberant nonchalance. ‘To make sure it—she—was a safe bet, I said to her—the maiden—“What’s it worth to rescue you, eh love?”’

‘You didn’t? That’s risky,’ George said.

‘Yes, well, I still got some.’

‘You could have got a black eye.’

Peter rubbed his cheek. Luckily the maiden’s slap had been very flimsy, and no bruising showed. ‘This job is nothing without bravery. You’ve got to be in it to win it.’

George sighed. ‘I think maybe I don’t want to be in it.’

‘Hang up your sword?’ Alexander asked, dumbfounded.

‘It’s just not working out. No women, lame tasks, annoying rescues.’ He jabbed the table. ‘Plus, there are too many stories about that dragon for my liking.’

‘Dragon?’ Frederick sprayed a mouthful of ale across his compatriots. ‘There’s no such thing as dragons. Mythical, George, that’s all they are.’

‘I don’t know about “mythical”, Fred,’ Peter said.

‘Well, I haven’t seen one.’ Alexander pondered. ‘Not since last Wednesday anyway.’

‘You saw it?’ George was alarmed.

‘Yes, Wednesday, up on the hill there.’

Peter laid a hand on Alexander’s shoulder. ‘That was a sheep, mate.’

‘No. It didn’t look like any sheep I’d ever seen. Nothing like that one Mrs Jones has in her yard.’

‘That’s a cat.’

‘A cat, you say?’ Alexander stroked his square, stubbled chin.

Peter waved away the diversion. ‘That’s what they’re saying, George. It’s been feeding on livestock outside the village.’

‘A *dragon*?’ George asked.

‘I only go by what I hear. Soon enough, it’ll be terrorising innocent maidens—you mark my words.’

‘Now *that* would be some rescue,’ Peter said.

‘It’s all yours,’ George said.

‘What if I’m busy?’ Peter’s face was worried. ‘Who will save the town then? None of you can handle it. Who will be the daring, brave hero if not me?’

‘It’ll never come into town.’

‘And if it does? Look, let’s say you meet this dragon—’

‘Which I won’t,’ George stated. ‘Because they don’t exist.’

‘What are you going to do—write it a strongly-worded letter?’

All three burst out laughing.

George buried his nose in his ale and tried to work out how to turn the conversation onto something more pleasant, like the plague or the likelihood of the sun turning to petals, thereby making them all icicles.

Icicles who couldn’t laugh at him.

The rain had stopped by the time he walked home through the mud. Instead, a chill wind blew.

As he neared the comfort of home, a small yellow flash winked in the clear sky.

Was there a dark shape too? George clutched his sword in fear.

Another yellow spot burned and died.

George bowed his head and hurried on. ‘Dragons? Nah.’

The following morning, George was on his way to the market in the adjoining town—the turnips were much better quality than the shrivelled specimens Balthazar offered in the village—when he heard a voice calling in alarm.

A woman was running in his direction. He checked around to make sure there could be no confusion. He was alone. This tended to happen—people in distress saw a suit of armour and flagged him down for all sorts of nonsense. Perhaps he should go out in plain clothing sometimes? During the week, and save heroic deeds for the weekend?

No time for musing—she was upon him, and a very appealing maid at that. His spirits lifted.

‘What can I do for you, fair lady?’

‘I need help. It is my poor Esmerelda—she’s stranded!’

George furtively glanced at the woman’s curves. She didn’t appear to be maternal in bearing. This Esmerelda must be a sister, a cousin, or perhaps her mother?

‘Stranded where?’

The woman pointed. ‘The river.’ Her beseeching eyes twinkled blue.

‘The river, you say, fair lady?’

‘Yes, Esmerelda is marooned on a rocky island. Please help me, good knight. I will be sore grateful.’ She stroked his chestplate. ‘Sore, *sore* grateful.’ She fluttered her eyelids.

He swallowed hard. ‘Then... then I will help.’

‘Thank you, kind sir knight. My house is yonder. Bring my Esmerelda, and you will have earned a reward.’

‘Run home, fair maid.’ He drew his sword in order to look the part of the hero. ‘Fear not! George will rescue your dear one.’

He beamed, gazed into her eyes once more, and then broke into a run across the field which led down to the river. The prospect of a *physical* reward from this quite fair damsel spurred him on as he loped through the grass.

He arrived at the river to find it running strong. Very strong. There was a flat rocky outcrop midstream, a couple of yards wide. Esmerelda was stranded there, as he’d been told. Esmerelda was clearly in distress.

Esmerelda was also a goat.

‘I really can pick them,’ he murmured between heavy breaths.

Nonetheless, it was a rescue, wasn’t it? And she *had* said she’d be grateful. *Sore* grateful. With fluttered eyelids in attendance.

He floundered down the bank and waded into the torrent. It nearly knocked him off his feet, but he heaved on through yards of swirling water as Esmerelda's plaintive bleating stung his ears.

He hauled himself onto the minuscule island, weeds clinging to the myriad holes in his mail. Mercifully, the goat didn't charge him, butt him, or even lick him. It even ceased its annoying noise.

Perhaps, George thought, this would be the first rescuee who didn't complain endlessly about the tardiness of his arrival, the cut of his jib, or the size of his weapon.

He took Esmerelda—bulky and moist as she was—in his arms and eased into the rushing water. As soon as he took his first wobbly pace on the slippery riverbed, the goat started to wriggle, struggle, and then thrash.

George cursed vociferously and clutched the animal tighter. It bleated in his ears. He chastised it. It continued to bray and writhe. He staggered onwards.

Quickly, he was midstream and struggling to remain vertical. Esmerelda seemed to want to leap out and swim to safety. He had a mind to let it—whether it sank or survived—and then remembered the maiden's eyes, hips and offer.

So, in a snap decision, he balled a fist and smacked his gauntlet, just hard enough, over the goat's skull. The writhing and moaning abated.

Though the deadweight was only marginally better than a live deadweight, he traversed the remainder of the river and collapsed onto the home bank. Water drained from his lower body, and his breathing returned to normal. He reeked of stagnant mud and wished he could have cut off his nose, but the mission was complete, and there were always sacrifices to be made in the pursuit of heroic deeds.

Well, moderately heroic.

Esmerelda lay still. George didn't worry for a couple of minutes—he'd never knocked a 'maiden' unconscious before.

Then he did worry because the animal's chest wasn't moving. He laid his gloved palm on it, but it remained still. He gazed at the goat, rent with guilt and worry. What could he do? Revive it?

He wondered how the real maiden would feel. He considered her promised reward. What if it was more than mere intimacy—what if there was financial recompense? She hadn't appeared wealthy, but it could have passed him by while he'd been assessing her... other qualities.

What if she were rich enough to make this single rescue transformative for him? Hanging up his sword could be a realistic proposition.

He looked at the prone Esmerelda again.

Even with the promise of money, there was still the sore gratefulness.

He closed his eyes, forced down the bile, took hold of the goat's jaws and began breathing into its mouth.

Esmerelda bounded the last few yards to the maiden's dwelling, calling excitedly.

George was still spitting on the ground, trying to remove both the taste and the evidence. After all, the maiden didn't need to know that, as rescues went, it hadn't all gone to plan. Less than perfect. Not swimmingly.

The lady emerged from the house, and her face lit up with joy.

Wow, George thought, imagine if I had that kind of relationship with an animal. A human would be even better. Might it be *this* human?

‘Thank you, good knight.’ She patted Esmerelda on the head. The goat nuzzled her legs.

‘It is nothing, good lady,’ George said.

‘You’re very wet.’

‘A mere trifling matter. Esmerelda is safe—that is the main thing.’

‘All the same, you shouldn’t catch a cold. Would you like to get out of those wet garments?’

His heart leapt. He peered inside the house. ‘Why, yes, if I may.’

‘Then run on home, quickly, and change. I don’t want to have your chills on my conscience.’

His mouth opened and closed like the fish he’d yanked from his armour minutes earlier.

‘I see. Yes.’

She moved closer. ‘But be sure to return tomorrow for your... reward.’

Her smile immediately lifted his spirits again. ‘Yes, good lady, I shall!’

She grabbed a handful of Esmerelda’s neck hair. ‘Come on, naughty girl.’ She flashed George a smile and went inside.

George let out a happy sigh and squelched down the street.

He was busy wondering how many small river creatures were enjoying his callouses when he spied Maria walking in his direction, carrying a pail. He hurriedly wiped the worst grass stains from his chest plate, checked his mouth for goat breath, and slowed to greet her.

‘George, you look a sight.’

He hoped she didn’t ask why because he didn’t want to lie. ‘Can I help you with that pail?’

‘It’s not too heavy, thank you. Have you been swimming?’

He casually plucked a strand of waterweed from his upper arm. 'No. Just rescuing some poor stranded individual. You know—all in another day's work. Not a big thing—saving a life. It's what I do.'

She stepped closer. 'You've always secretly been my hero, George. Since we were little. It's just... Rex *provides* for me. His parents arranged everything, and it's not like I can do anything about it now. Take care, George.' She patted him on the arm and walked away.

He stood there for a moment, sullen. Then he swore something wriggled near his big toe, so he strode off, hoping to squish it.

The inn was quiet that night, and he moderated his ale intake so as not to be fug-headed the next day for his re-acquaintance with the goat's mistress, whose name he realised he'd failed to discover. Perhaps they'd deal with that kind of courtesy in the pre-reward small talk.

'You're surprisingly chipper tonight, George,' Alexander said.

He shrugged. 'Just a successful rescue, that's all.'

Peter shook George's hand vigorously. 'Excellent news. Was the fair soul any trouble?'

'Yes,' Frederick said, 'Another graceless maiden to chill your soul?'

'Actually, the mission wasn't without trouble, but the maiden has repeated her gratitude many times.' He pulled a smug grin. 'I go to her dwelling tomorrow for her thanks.'

Alexander slapped him on the back. 'Good for you. Not such a loser anymore.'

George begged the gods that his friends wouldn't press him for details.

Peter slurped his ale. ‘Get it while you can. At the rate things are going, the villagers will all desert within days. The dragon is ranging closer.’

George waved it away. ‘Pah! Hearsay.’

Alexander fixed him in a look of gravity. ‘Oh no. The dragon is definitely terrorising the outer dwellings.’

‘Then let’s join together and defeat it—if it truly exists, which it doesn’t.’

‘It does!’

‘Describe it.’

Alexander fell sheepish. ‘The problem is...’

‘Aha!’ George sniped. ‘I knew it!’

Peter clutched George’s arm. ‘It’s not that. Nobody can give a description because they all run away.’

‘Horse manure. It’s a giant flying monster—if legend is to be believed. Which I don’t. How hard can it be to track down?’

‘We can’t hunt it if we don’t know where it lives,’ Frederick said.

‘You said it was bigger than a house! Where is it hiding—behind a tree?!’

Peter slapped down his tankard. ‘Well, if you’re so clever, you find it, George.’

‘But—’

‘If you want a turnaround in your fortunes, you take this quest.’

Alexander nodded. ‘Peter’s right. We’ve tons of other quests to be going along with. Some pay coins. Some give... womanly rewards. Why should we chase down this dragon for free? Nobody has offered any reward for killing it. There’s no maiden to save. It’s only eating cats.’

‘Sheep, mate,’ Frederick corrected.

‘So, until it becomes a proper nuisance, gets a price on its head, we’ve got better things to do.’ Peter nodded sagely. ‘But if it ups its game, I’m there.’ He feigned a slashing, stabbing motion with his hand. ‘I won’t just be the talk of the land, but the world!’

George’s mouth opened and closed. His brain whirled. ‘How can people run from something but not be able to describe it?’

Alexander leant in. ‘When you look in its terrible eyes, it makes you forget.’

Peter and Frederick nodded sagely.

George’s brow knit. ‘How do we know? How can you know you’ve forgotten something?’

His friends eyed each other, seeking answers.

‘Well,’ Alexander began, ‘The thing is—’

Peter stood and puffed out his chest. ‘No matter. I’ll have to look it in the eyes when I kill it. It will feel the point of my sword, and I don’t care if I forget what it looks like. You can all remind me what a ruthless hero I was, unbowed by its ruthless gaze. And woe betide any of you trying to steal the women who line up in droves to offer thanks for deliverance from the beast.’

The trio looked at Peter, then at each other.

‘Fine,’ George said. ‘He’s all yours.’

George walked taller the next day. He’d been up late into the night sharpening his sword and polishing his armour. He greeted passers-by with a wave and even brushed off the sight of Maria and Rex, arm in arm.

He stood in the doorway of the maiden’s house. Wonderful odours were leaking out onto the street.

‘Good knight, come in!’

‘George is my name.’ He bowed and entered, feeling a tingling in his loins.

‘I am Juno. Your reward is at hand. Rescuing Esmerelda will give me succour for many days.’

‘It was a trifling matter. A woman of your beauty deserves nothing more.’

She blushed and gestured to the living space. ‘Sit, or lie, as is your want. I will prepare things and return.’

Excited, George removed his chestplate and set down his scabbard, then stretched out on the floor, propping himself up on one arm, awaiting Juno’s entrance.

Quickly she arrived, bearing two bowls of steaming food.

He frowned but smiled. ‘A meal, first?’

‘A meal, certainly. It is the least you deserve.’ She handed over the bowl.

It certainly smelled delicious. ‘You cook well, Juno.’

‘Thank you, brave George.’

‘What dish is this?’

‘Goat stew.’

An icy wind cut through George as he walked to the inn, but it didn’t blow away his decision. Likewise, the dark clouds could not have portended anything because he was comfortable with his future direction. Life would get better now, not worse.

He downed the first flagon quickly, took a refill, and sat with his soon-to-be *former* colleagues.

‘So,’ Alexander nudged him, ‘How was the *reward*?’

George had prepared for this. ‘I certainly had my fill. Very tasty.’

Which wasn’t a lie because the broth had been excellent—once he’d stopped gagging at the thought of its contents.

‘You old dog, George.’

‘Look, lads, I’m not going to lie to you—this whole errands and rescues game, it’s not for me.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I’m hanging up my sword.’

‘What?’ all three asked in unison.

‘I’ve just had enough. I’m kidding myself. What I want is Maria, and I can’t have her, so what’s the point?’

‘What about fame?’ Peter asked.

‘Riches?’ Frederick suggested.

‘Plenty of other maidens, too,’ Alexander added.

George held up his hand. ‘It’s exhausting trying so hard and always failing.’

‘You were *trying*?’ Peter smirked.

‘I thought you just took on any old rubbish to take your mind off Maria,’ Frederick said.

George wondered how much truth there was in that.

‘I wouldn’t settle for any old maiden.’ Alexander preened himself. ‘I have standards.’

Peter scoffed quietly.

‘It’s decided.’ George set down his ale assertively. ‘I’m done.’

A stunned silence fell.

‘Well,’ Frederick piped up, ‘All the more money for me... I mean us.’

‘Women,’ Alexander added.

Peter nodded. ‘And fame.’ He clapped a hand on George’s forearm. ‘So, what will you do?’

‘Nothing—for a while. Take some time out. Examine my options. Besides, it won’t be the weather for raids and rescues this week. The Old Crone says it will snow.’

Alexander snorted. 'What does she know? She said a dragon was coming, and it would chew through all the cats in the village.'

'Sheep,' Peter said.

'And it *has* come!' Frederick pointed out.

Alexander was confused. 'Anyway, the point is, is George going to laze around like a lox? You'll get fat without needing to lug all this metal around on daring missions.'

'Oh no. The first thing I'm going to do is rescue my father's old sledge from the barn and get it ready for some great exercise. When the snow comes, the hillside will be covered, and it will be joyous, whizzing down there, beholding to nobody, no nagging maidens, no—'

'Sledging? You're giving up knighting to go *sledging*?'

'What's the problem? All work and no play make George a dull boy. And it's just for a day.'

'I've seen that sledge of yours,' Peter said. 'You look like a tool on it.'

'You're just jealous,' George replied. 'Because it's not just a plank of wood. It's comfortable and safe. It has proper sides and a metal blade to cut through snowdrifts. Racing down such a steep hill on it is a damn sight more dangerous than... wading across a stupid river or getting a cat down from a tree.'

'It's more like a sleigh than a sledge,' Frederick said, laughing.

Alexander just shook his head. 'What a loser.'

In the morning, George could have kissed the Old Crone... if she wasn't so wrinkled, warty, and smelled less of rotten cabbage.

The snow was so deep throughout the village that it took him an hour to dig his way into the barn and rescue the big sledge.

He untangled the old rope attached to its bow and dragged it outside. He breathed deeply of the crisp air. It was good to be free from travails. Yes—what he was embarking on was childish, but he needed an emotional enema after the recent laughable episodes. He wouldn't care who looked on as he yelled at the top of his voice, the sledge's runners cutting through the thick new carpet of white.

He wanted to feel young again. Unchained. Master of his destiny.

He went into the house, put on another layer of cloth—all armour had been left to one side, including his sword—and returned to his leisure.

The hill behind the village was lofty and steep, and his boots sank deep. Going was tough, and his breathing laboured, but it was worth the effort when he reached the top.

The view was magnificent.

The sky was blue, and the village lay in panorama below him. The snow had drifted in places, reaching up to the roofs of some houses. Small figures fought through the whiteness, clearing paths, digging out their livestock or rescuing damp firewood.

He spotted Maria's house on the edge of the village. A figure was at the rear, pulling one of their stubborn sheep out of a drift. Further along the road, a trio of armoured men was unmistakable as they offered aid to hardy souls who were trying to put their day on an even keel.

No silly errands for me, George mused as he gathered up the rope and dropped it into the sledge. He pointed the vehicle's sharp nose towards the shallowest part of the incline—more speed and fun could come later—and climbed aboard.

As he pushed down onto the start of the incline, the dark shape emerged from the snow-decked copse beyond the village edge and rose into the sky.

The sledge slid. George's foot scrabbled at the snow, but it was too late. The run had begun. He grabbed the high sides and ducked low against the icy air blasting in his face.

At the edge of the village, the dark shape was now distinguishable, undeniably dragon-like. It belched forth a warning spurt of flame as it homed in on its target.

The sledge hurtled. Powder snow sprayed liberally over George's head as he watched in horror. The creature's massive, jagged wings fluttered, putting the monster into a hover above Maria's back allotment. Rex waved his arms furiously, helplessly, against the marauder.

George tried vainly to change his trajectory, but the missile careened onwards, downwards, towards the thick drifts behind the houses of Maria's neighbours. Panic gripped him. He was halfway down the hill.

Noticing the sheep, the dragon cocked back its neck, arrowed its gaze towards the animal, and opened its mouth.

Instinctively, George's mouth opened too, but in a silent scream, as the flames engulfed first the sheep and then Rex. His gaze leapt here and there, hoping against hope that Maria had sought shelter in the bowels of her property.

The sledge rocked and swayed. George was on a collision course with the neighbour's house but had no power to avoid the danger. The land was levelling, but his pace remained ferocious.

His eyes widened to saucers as he saw Maria pelt from the house. Her screams carried the hundred yards' distance. He wanted to bellow at her not to be so foolish. He wanted to whip out his sword and hurl it like an impromptu lance, but he knew his words would be lost in the wind. Plus, his sword lay on the floor at home.

Instead, George could only narrow his eyes as the dragon, having crisped two victims already, turned its attention to Maria's panicked form. The dragon back-winged towards her, arched its neck, and prepared to exhale.

The sledge bore down on the snowdrift which backed onto the building. The white carpet rose like a ramp—and George was heading straight for it. He leant forwards and lifted his frozen hands to get a better grip on the side rails.

The sledge thumped onto the incline. George was jolted hard and thrown backwards. He flailed uselessly and tipped backwards, heels over head, out of the sledge, into smothering snow. Legs akimbo, he rolled, head dizzy, as the sledge hurtled on.

It mounted the building's roof and shot into the air.

The dragon opened its mouth, ready to roast the pesky human. Maria screamed.

The sledge, its front ram glistening in the sunlight, flew like an arrow towards the beast's head.

George came to rest and gazed, open-mouthed.

The dragon's evil red eyes had barely a second to take in this unusual incoming missile before the sledge's prow sliced through its neck, opening its fat arteries and drenching the ground.

The sledge pivoted on impact, dived, crashed to the ground and disintegrated.

Close behind it was the dragon's lifeless form, which plummeted to the white and red-carpeted street with a sickening thud.

Maria clutched her brow and sat hard into a snowdrift.

George windmilled himself upright and staggered towards the road, spraying plumes of snow in his wake. His heart hammered, and his stomach convulsed.

Ahead of him, the three silver knights battled up the road. He reached Maria first, his trousers caked in ice and dragon blood, and plopped down beside her. Her face was white, and her chest heaved.

‘George,’ she panted, eyes wide.

‘I was too late. I’m sorry.’

She tried to take everything in. ‘You...you...’

‘I saw Rex, I...’

‘Don’t worry, don’t worry. You saved me.’

‘Well, I... I suppose I did. But I was too late for your good man.’

She patted his arm and offered a sanguine expression. ‘Rex and I were... convenient. We never had what you and I had.’

‘Over the slurry pit?’

She nodded, and a sweet smile played on her lips.

The trio of friends stumbled to a halt.

‘George! You dark horse. What a scheme!’ Peter’s expression bordered on admiration.

‘That sledge of yours—what a weapon,’ Frederick added.

‘Yes. You really... sleighed that dragon.’ Alexander laughed heartily.

George ignored them, offered his hand and helped Maria to her feet. She gazed at his face, then at the lifeless hulk nearby. Its scales twinkled, and its sightless saucer-sized eyes were fixed. Set against the snow, it was rather a magnificent sight.

It stank, though.

She grabbed his arm. ‘Let me paint you! Come, stand by the beast. Put one foot upon its back as if you have just vanquished it.’ She ushered him towards the dragon. ‘If that works, maybe we can do another—perhaps you atop your horse, sword drawn.’ She pondered. ‘Yes, that could work. Not exactly true to the deed, but still.’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Yes, yes, I must. You deserve it. You are my hero. And then afterwards...’ Her eyes danced impishly.

‘I know—stew, I suppose.’

She frowned. ‘Stew? No. I was thinking...’ She whispered in his ear.

A shiver ran down his spine—one not triggered by the weather.

He swallowed. He looked at her, surprised. Pleasantly surprised.

‘Really?’

‘Oh, come off it, George, don’t play innocent. You’re hardly a saint, are you?’

THE END

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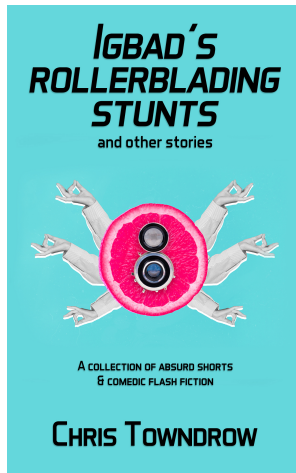
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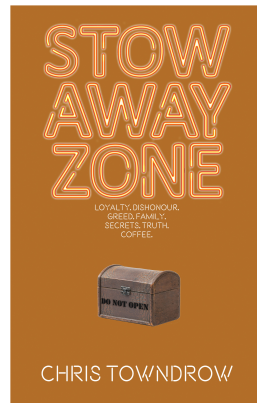
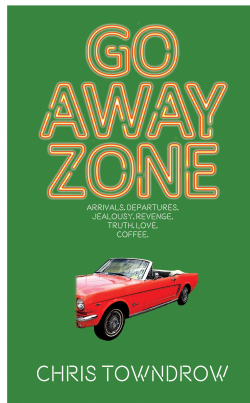
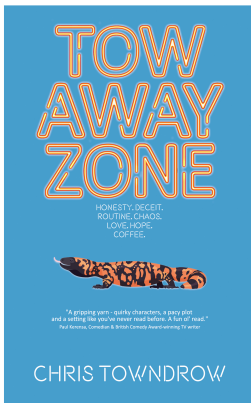
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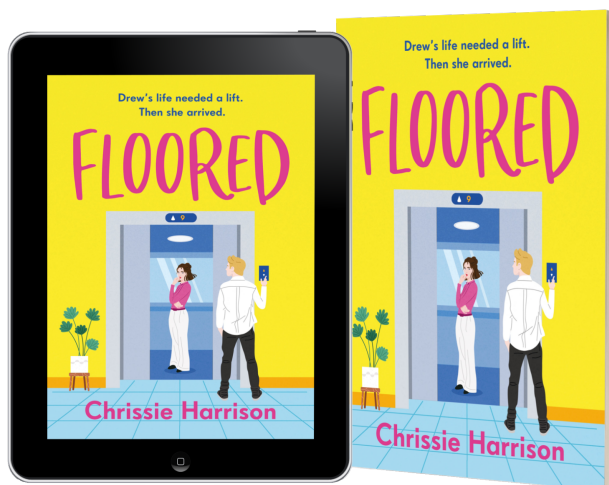
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