

TOW
AWAY
ZONE

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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*

“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.”

“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.”

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

“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.”

PROLOGUE

Beckman sighed, took a last look at the double-page spread of the '65 Mustang, and tossed the well-thumbed magazine onto the uneven wooden floor beside the old chair.

He rose and groused over to the doorway of the treehouse.

'Coming!'

Below on the back porch, Mom stood without hands on hips, which meant he hadn't explicitly done anything wrong. She'd also not used his full name, so he was pretty relaxed about the upcoming encounter. Still, it wasn't dinner time, so he was somewhat bemused. Shielding her eyes from the late afternoon sun, she looked across the scrubby and scorched garden to where he gazed down from the gnarled cedar.

Ever keen to impress she who doted on him, he reached for the rope that dangled nearby, gave it a quick yank, then sprung outward, a teenage Tarzan, swinging forward and careering down the acutely-angled makeshift zip-wire until his sneakers grazed yellowed turf and he stumbled to a halt.

He gave himself a 5.2 for that landing, knowing it was rushed by circumstance. He wanted to flash Mom an innocent smile, but now he could see her expression clearly, he sensed jollity would not be well-received.

From somewhere inside the house, Bruce reminded them they were born in the USA. Beckman was already apprised of that fact. The immediate uncertainty was of more concern.

He mentally double-checked that he'd no specific reason to feel guilty or expect admonishment. He didn't—what goes on inside a young man's treehouse is his own private matter.

Besides, cars were cars. Dreaming was not a crime. In treehouses, bedrooms, or dens across the land, other young men were up to far worse. Far worse was not tolerated in the Spiers household.

‘What’s up, Mom?’

She gave him a look bordering on apologetic. ‘We’re moving.’

‘Again?!’ he asked with disbelief.

‘I thought you’d rather hear it from me than your father.’

‘I don’t want to damn well hear it at all!’

‘Language, Beckman!’

‘But ...’ he began, realised he didn’t know what he’d started, then figured his tone gave pretty much all the information she needed. Besides, his reaction was always the same, and never altered the situation.

‘I know.’ She laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s not ideal.’

He sighed as heavily as it was possible for a person to sigh without actually blowing their lungs across a backyard.

How could it be worse?

A noise rang from inside the house.

This is how it could be worse.

Dad appeared, tugged his wife towards him, and kissed her on the cheek. Mom’s thick-rimmed glasses, jammed up above her fringe, nearly toppled off their perch but tangled in her thick frizz long enough for her to reach up and rescue them.

Dad slipped off his Aviators, an addendum he sported which never failed to make him look incredibly uncool.

‘You tell him?’

‘I did,’ she replied.

‘Better pack, son. You know the drill.’

‘Why?’ Beckman gambled.

‘Pardon me?’ came the unequivocal reply.

‘Why do we have to leave?’

‘This place isn’t working out.’

Beckman had heard those words before, and they implied the same old story. He also knew that saying so would be the passport to his last days here being unpleasant, in addition to unwelcome.

‘Okay,’ he grumbled, turning back towards his lofty wooden sanctuary.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To reflect on this... news,’ he said daringly.

‘You need to pack.’

‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’

‘We’re leaving tomorrow.’

‘But I’m seeing Janelle tonight,’ he protested.

‘No, you’re not. Might as well cancel your date. In fact, cancel the whole Janelle episode.’

‘But she’s—’

‘Here. And we’re not. We’re on the road at oh-eight-hundred.’

Beckman hated the way Dad always stated the time like a military order. Notwithstanding circumstances.

His head fell. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good.’

After a respectful pause, he headed for the rope ladder.

‘I’ll clear out up here first,’ he offered as an excuse.

It passed muster, as further words weren’t forthcoming.

His feet were heavy on the saggy rungs of the ladder, his heart leaden.

Janelle liked Mustangs nearly as much as he did. She was cool like that. Her dad had a friend who once owned one. A ’66 in blue. Things had been going well with Janelle. Tonight was supposed to be Second Base Night.

Looks like you’ve more chance of owning a ’65 Mustang, sunshine.

CHAPTER 1

*S*carlet? Probably.

Imperial? Likely.

Crimson? Possibly.

Spanish? Could be.

Cardinal? Doubtful.

Beckman sighed. He was bored of this game.

The color was red, which was the important thing. Except it wasn't important, not in the slightest. He'd never even seen red—it was merely a word, a concept.

It was a light, a flickering light. *That* was the important thing—because it was pissing him off. Keeping him awake. Riling him. Mocking him.

He rolled over. The portable alarm clock on the nightstand read 22:11.

The motel was full; no point in trudging down to the grunting oaf on the check-in desk to request a change of room. There'd only be an argument, he'd grow even more awake and still wind up back in Room 12.

There lay a quantum of solace—he'd wangled Room 12.

Yet, now, it didn't feel like such a good peg to hang anything on. Tight as he pulled the curtains to the window edges, the material was much too thin to block out the light entirely. A static wash of red—of any shade—he could cope with. This damn irregular flickering, though? Torture.

He debated the merit of asking Grunting Oaf for the neon frontage sign to be switched off, but knew he'd come across like a petty jerk.

Instead, he reluctantly threw back the covers, flicked on the ineffectual bedside lamp, padded across the thin carpet, and rooted through his open suitcase. Tucked

into a side pocket was an eye mask, a freebie relic he'd kept from a TWA flight back away—a cross-country trip to see Mom, if he remembered right.

Rarely had he found it necessary to sink so low.

The last time was, what, two years ago?

He'd run out of gas in the middle of nowhere and spent a night in the back seat of the car. The moonlit hours and incessant cicadas turned out to be a minor inconvenience compared to the litany of aches he woke with. It had been even worse than the nights in the treehouse twenty years earlier—though those sleep-outs were more about independence than comfort.

At least tonight he had a bed.

He avoided thinking about what adventures it might have experienced. The long years of a motel-heavy existence had warned him off such seeping imaginations and revulsions.

Instead, he slid under the starchy covers, adjusted the eye mask until his view became blissful darkness, and buried his head as best as he could in the unhelpfully spongey pillow.

The air conditioning unit hummed and, now that the visual distraction had gone, his ears became more attuned to the surroundings. But was the flickering light now making an intermittent buzzing?

'Oh, snap,' he breathed in the darkness.

Could this night suck even more?

He pulled the edges of the pillow up around his ears and hoped sleep would arrive before cramp set into his arms.

Oh, for the ability to count sheep, he mused. He'd have to count his blessings instead.

He got as far as three and lolled his head over. How much time had passed? Would the unpredictable gods of night and slumber grant him morning?

22:21.

He found a fourth blessing; nobody was listening to the TV or playing music at an unsocial volume in the adjoining rooms. No yelling. No we-know-what-you're-up-to grunting.

Nevertheless, on such nights, dormant thoughts resurfaced about trading his Buick for a station wagon or an RV. At least that way, he could make room for a sleeping bag and be sure the courtesy light didn't have a mind of its own or harbour dreams of a career in a nightclub.

Maybe a different vehicle would give him a new lease of life? Something needed to change.

Or did it?

Blessing One: a steady job.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Not every stop-over on the road turned out like this. Tonight's issue was an annoyance, a mosquito. Ironically, it was as likely to keep him awake as hearing such a tiny buzzing in the room, even if he couldn't see the insect. The difference being, he wouldn't wake up tomorrow with a red welt on his arm.

So, another blessing, surely. By that logic, he could come up with a million more.

Maybe he *could* count them:

(1) Steady job.

(2) Travel. Lots of travel.

(3) Meet interesting people. Sometimes.

(4) Health.

(5) Loving family. Well, a semblance of.

(6) No noisy neighbors. Tonight, at any rate.

(7) No mosquito.

(8) A place to call home.

(9) Only four more stamps to go on the loyalty card before the next free coffee.

See—things could be worse. Now, go to sleep Beckman.

Miraculously, the fog descended. The world outside slipped into redundancy.

His breathing shallowed.

Sunday crept towards its end.

His cell phone rang. It could have been an air raid siren.

He mentally hauled himself back up the ladder to reality as quickly as he could muster, pushed aside the eye mask, stumbled out of bed with an 'Oh, snap', and scooped up the chirruping device from the desk. The off-brand charging cable halted his movement, so he rudely yanked it out and hit the Answer key.

Amidst the bleary chaos, he'd noted that the caller was "Office", and his mood nosedived.

Office? On a Sunday? Have I woken in a parallel universe?

'Spiers,' he mumbled.

'Is that you, Beckman?'

He recognised the terse voice. Otherwise, given the time of night and his general humour, he'd have taken pains to point out that (1) this was his personal cell, so who did the caller think would answer? and (2) the caller had addressed him by name, thereby proving he already understood item (1).

However, Beckman kept it zipped, knowing the caller wasn't someone who took kindly to such logic or admonishments.

'Yes, sir, this is me.'

'Malvolio here.'

Beckman took a calming breath; the words were hardly a revelation.

A Sunday? What fresh hell is this?

A flourish of downdraft from the meshed duct in the stained false ceiling wafted cool air down his back and raised goosebumps. The room flickered intermittently scarlet or imperial. Or possibly crimson.

'Yes, Mr Malvolio?' he enquired.

'I've some good news for you.'

Good? Good!

Suddenly, Sunday could go hang.

Beckman waited to hear. And waited. And realised Mr Malvolio was waiting for him to indicate that he was waiting, because what else could possibly be more exciting than to be woken (kind of) in the middle (barely) of the night by a random phone call from your godawful boss, bearing news which doubtless could wait until the first—or ideally second—coffee of the following day had passed your lips?

'I'm all ears, sir.' He scratched his balls.

'Belcher is dead.'

Beckman waited for more detail. And waited. And realised Mr Malvolio was expecting him to say something to indicate a reaction to the apparent Good News of someone's death. Because what could be more sensible than prolonging a phone call in the not middle of a Sunday night when you're standing with itchy balls in a cold breeze in a godawful motel room in the ass end of nowhere?

He really wanted to say, "Get bent and call me in the morning, you atrocious slave-driving freak".

But he liked his job. Well, he *did* his job. It was the only one he had, and he didn't want to lose it.

So, he said, 'Really? How?'

'He got struck by lightning this afternoon.' Malvolio said it with the same level of intrigue or sadness as one might when ordering pizza toppings.

'Wow.' Beckman was stupefied. 'That's a bad break.'

'Not for you, Spiers. That moves you up to Number Two.'

Malvolio had evidently had enough of this heartfelt wallowing in the untimely demise of one of his workforce and was, predictably, getting down to brass tacks. Or, more likely in his case, gold tacks.

‘Sheesh. I guess it does. Poor Belcher.’

‘Sad to see anyone die while they’re still in the race.’

‘Or any time,’ Beckman suggested. His mind was barely half on the call now.

Belcher’s sales volumes are apparently deemed irrelevant to the race, his slate cleaned. One of the riders has dropped out.

‘I suppose so. So, get your hiney moving, Spiers. Number Two position—pretty good going for a man like you.’

Such praise.

Beckman gave the illuminated screen a hard stare. Not that Malvolio judged him wrongly—Number Two *was* pretty good going—but for Beckman to verbally concede such a fact would have been a weakness. So, he said nothing.

Would Malvolio take the opportunity to crack the whip further? Beckman mentally wagered his worldly possessions on it.

‘Only five days left,’ the harsh old voice continued. ‘It’s not impossible. You can make Number One. Shoulder to the wheel, Spiers, nose to the grindstone.’

‘Absolutely, sir,’ he lied. ‘I’ll get started tomorrow morning, first light.’

‘That’s what I like to hear.’ Then the phone *boop-booped* to indicate that the line had been hung up.

Beckman stared at the screen in a casserole of a stupor made up of tiredness, disbelief, revulsion, hope and itchiness.

Esmond Belcher is dead. I just got promoted to Number Two on the Salesman of the Year chart. One week to go.

Could I? Could I really make Number One? Finally?

In a pig’s eye.

He gave his balls a good long scratch and went to bed.

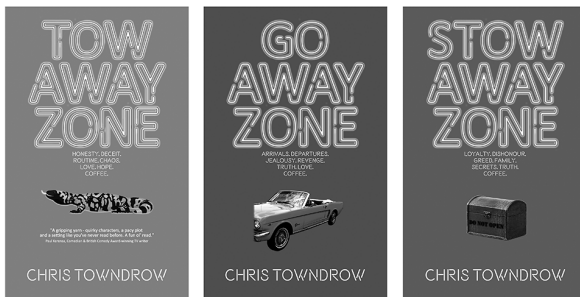
Beckman and Lolita return in
“Go Away Zone”
The Sunrise Trilogy – book 2

A small town.
A happy couple.
An accountant with a grudge.
A corporate deal-maker on the prowl.
An unexplored portal to nobody-knows-where.

If Beckman Spiers thought life and love had been all figured out when he arrived in Sunrise, met Lolita Milan, and changed his career, he’s about to find out things aren’t that easy. This quirky town has a secret, and Lolita’s ex-fiancé has a scheme that threatens to scupper Beckman’s new job, destroy Lolita’s business ambitions, and drive a wedge between them.

The only way out may be to gamble everything—even their own lives.

The sequel to “Tow Away Zone” is a dramatic comedy caper fuelled by coffee, friendships and switchbacks aplenty.



About the author



Chris Towndrow has been a writer since 1991. He began with science fiction, inspired by Isaac Asimov, Iain M Banks, and numerous film and TV canons. After a few years spent creating screenplays, in 2004 he moved into playwriting and has had several productions professionally performed.

His first published novel was 2012's space opera "Sacred Ground". He then focussed on sci-fi, and the Enna Dacourt pentalogy was completed in 2023.

He has always drawn inspiration from the big screen, and 2019's quirky romantic comedy "Tow Away Zone" owes much to the Coen Brothers' work. This book 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 now returns to his passion for writing accessible humour and will largely focus on romantic comedy novels. The first of these arrives on 4th April 2024, under the pen name Chrissie Harrison.

Chris lives on the outskirts of London with his family and works as a video editor and producer. He is a member of the UK Society of Authors.

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Also by the author

Drew, a lovelorn accountant with elevatophobia, accidentally discovers a mysterious voice named Elle in the office lift. Is it his fevered imagination, the ghost of his dead fiancée, or a secret admirer?

Unbeknownst to him, the voice is actually Hannah, a sparky but socially anxious colleague who is secretly working on a project to expose their sexist boss.

When Drew discovers the girl behind the voice, a relationship blossoms alongside a shared determination to bring justice to their workplace, risking everything.

Will their daring plan succeed or will it jeopardise the happiness they've found with each other?

