

Tow Me

Away



Romance Divas Book Challenge



by Cynthia Justlin

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“TOW ME AWAY”

“Mommy, where’s the car?”

Ally Waters righted the jug of apple juice threatening to spill from the overflowing shopping cart. Satisfied that the bottle wouldn’t topple to the pavement, she smiled at her five-year-old daughter, Makayla.

“It’s right over there, honey.”

Only it wasn’t. Not anymore. Her smile melted, quickly turning to a frown.

Where was her car?

“See, it’s gone.” Leave it to her daughter to point out the obvious.

She blew out a frustrated breath. “So it is.”

She squinted against the bright February sun and scanned the parking lot, but her dark blue Ford Taurus was nowhere in sight.

Makayla tipped her head. “Am I going to be late for ballet?”

Ally dragged her hand through Makayla’s auburn curls. “No, baby.”

Ever since Ally's divorce from Jake a year and a half ago, Makayla had become obsessed with ballet. It had started as something to fill the void left by her daddy, who'd turned his back on Makayla without a second glance when he'd walked out on Ally. Now, it was the only constant in Makayla's chaotic world and Ally refused to break her word. She'd get her daughter to ballet by bus, taxi, train...whatever it took.

A gust of wind kicked up and tore the shopping cart from her grasp. It rolled down a dip in the blacktop and she raced to catch up with it, Makayla's hand clutching hers.

That's when she spotted it.

Her car. Behind a tow truck executing a left turn onto Maple Drive.

She left the shopping cart in an empty parking space, snatched Makayla into her arms and ran.

"No! Stop!" She would've waved her arms, had they not been full of her laughing five-year-old. Makayla joined in, repeating Ally's shouts with unrestrained glee.

The squeal of air brakes split the air, drowning out their voices, as the dark grey truck executed a rough stop. Newberry Towing was emblazoned on the door in gold lettering.

Steve Newberry. She should've known.

Sweet, handsome, infuriating, Steve. Her friend, her rock. Ally tightened her hold on Makayla. Until he'd suddenly decided to turn the tables of their relationship on her.

He wanted more. She'd started to notice it in his eyes every time they'd gone for a walk or sat on her porch talking after Makayla went to sleep. It was in his touch when he hugged her goodnight, the way his hands lingered at her waist too long, or the way he studied her face when he thought she wasn't looking.

"Ma'am?" The driver, a stocky man with a toothpick stuck between his teeth poked his head out the window. "What's the problem?"

Ally shook herself. *What's the problem?* The problem, heaven help her, was she wanted what Steve offered. Desperately. But Jake's betrayal had punched a gaping hole in her heart and she vowed never again to risk the measly little bit she had left.

"That's mommy's car," Makayla piped up, pointing her dainty finger at the man with surprising authority.

The man raised a brow. "You called for a tow."

Ally's face flushed. "I most certainly did not call for a tow. Get my car off your truck. Right now." *Don't make me have to face Steve.* Not today, Valentine's Day, when the evidence of her loneliness slapped her in the face on every radio station, television commercial and greeting card rack.

He rolled the toothpick between his lips. “I’m sorry. No can do. Boss’ orders.”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t make that call. You have the wrong car.”

He frowned. “How many blue Ford Taurus’ could there be at Spears Market?”

Makayla threw her arms wide, her hand smacking Ally squarely on the nose. “I’m missing ballet!”

She lowered her wriggling daughter to the ground. “Shh, sweetie. We’ll get it all worked out.” She turned to the driver. “You need to call Steve and straighten this out.”

“Look, ma’am, I’m just trying to do my job. Steve said--”

“Fine. Forget it. How much room do you have in your truck?”

“What?”

“Hopefully enough for me, my daughter, and a cart load of groceries. Because we’re coming with you.”

* * *

Newberry Towing’s office was sparsely furnished with several deep brown vinyl seats, a veneer counter, and a small television mounted on the wall, tuned to CNN.

Ally tapped the bell on the counter, her ire taking her mind off the melting ice cream and defrosting meat stuck in the tow truck.

Steve strode out of the back room. “Ally!”

Tall, with wavy black hair and gray-green eyes, Steve was far too handsome for his own good. He was also charming, and stubborn, and just outrageous enough to pull such a stunt.

Ally opened her mouth intending to blast him with her anger, but her daughter beat her to it.

Makayla plunked her hands on her hips and raised her chin. “You made me miss ballet and mommy says you’re in hot water.” She scrunched her nose. “But I don’t see a bathtub.”

One corner of Steve’s mouth tipped as if fighting a smile. “Oh, boy, I’ve done it this time.” He turned his laughing eyes to Ally. “I think I’ve made Makayla mad at me.”

“She’s not the only one. You know I didn’t call for that tow. There’s not a thing wrong with my car.”

His eyes darkened to a stormy gray. “Ally, when are you going to accept my invitation to dinner?”

“We’ve had dinner countless times.”

His jaw hardened. “That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

She crossed her arms to keep herself from reaching for him across the counter. “And if you think this little stunt is going to change my mind...”

He lifted a hinged section of the wrap-around desk and came to stand in front of her. “I’m sorry. It was a stupid prank.” He captured her hand. “But when I drove past Spears and saw you and Makayla going inside...” He shook his head. “You don’t return my phone calls. You refuse to talk to me. We haven’t seen each other since Christmas.” His voice lowered. “I miss you, Ally. This was the only way I could think of to force you to hear me out.”

She tugged her hand from his grasp. “I’ve already said no to every invitation you’ve ever issued. What more is there to discuss?”

“It’s not because you’re not interested.” He clenched his jaw. “Damn it, Jake sure did a number on you. The bastard. If he ever comes around here—”

“No, Steve. Don’t. He isn’t worth it.”

“Then why are you letting him do this to you? You’re scared. I see it in your beautiful blue eyes every time I look at you.” His voice softened. “I don’t want to hurt you. I just want a chance.” He pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, and shot her a tentative grin that pierced her heart. “To see if I can show my best friend what she’s been missing by ignoring me for the last couple of months.”

She wanted to tell him she *wasn't* interested. She had no desire to have a relationship with him--or anyone else, for that matter. But her heart squeezed, and her pulse raced, and the lie wouldn't pass her lips.

"I have Makayla to think of," she whispered.

Steve looked at her daughter, who'd started twirling pirouettes in boredom, and grinned. "You two are a package deal. I've known that for a long time."

"And it doesn't worry you?"

He was silent for so long as he studied Makayla, Ally's breath backed up in her throat. *What if he could never learn to love her daughter?*

Then he turned his tumultuous gaze on her and said, "Ally, you and Makayla left your mark on my heart a long time ago. Take a chance and go to dinner with me tonight. Not as friends, but on a date." His mouth quirked. "The real deal with a goodnight kiss and everything."

A shaky laugh burst past her lips. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

He cupped her chin. "As long as you acknowledge that you might be. Someday. C'mon. Let's go to dinner. Please."

"Pizza?" Makayla piped in, executing a quick curtsy for her imaginary audience.

Steve nodded. "If your mom agrees."

"What about ballet?"

Her daughter fluttered her eyelashes and pressed her tiny hands against her heart. “It’s a real date. Much better than ballet. Can we, mommy?”

Ally looked from Steve to Makayla, her stomach dancing with a mixture of anticipation and nerves. A part of her recognized that this was Steve’s final offer. If she said no, he would probably never ask her again. If she said...

“Yes.” The word rushed from her mouth. “We’d love to.”

After all, it was just dinner.

Oh, but, it could be the start of so much more if only she was willing to let him tow her heart away.