

Pets Amore

Four Romantic Comedy Novellas

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Out-of-the-box Valentines



A Novella
by
Amy R. Anguish

*For my parents, who didn't make me wait until I moved out to get
that hamster I wanted. Thanks for supporting my dreams, big
and small!*

CHAPTER ONE



Trey Jones would do just about anything for his sister. Standing here, hamster cage in hand, his hyped-up six-year-old nephew beside him, and a room full of heart-shaped balloons ahead, he might have reached his limit. Was it Valentine's Day?

Of course it was. He knew the date. The significance had slipped his mind, not having anyone to shower with gifts on the over-commercialized holiday.

"Uncle Trey, look." Rylan hopped from foot to foot. Trey placed his free hand on Rylan's shoulder.

"I see." Though, considering the insane amount of pink and red before him, he might not ever see straight again. Even the petite woman going from seat to seat, tying the balloons in place, wore bright pink overalls over a red shirt. Her hair was done in two braids and crowned with a headband with springy hearts bouncing on top.

"Ms. Winters," Rylan shouted, even though she couldn't be more than five feet away.

She sprang up, eyes wide, the balloon slipping through her fingers and bumping against the ceiling. "Rylan, you're back."

“Guess what.” Rylan reached over and grabbed Houdini’s travel cage from Trey’s hand. “I brought my show-and-tell since I was sick last week.”

Ms. Winter’s eyes widened for a split second before she controlled her expression. But Trey had noticed. Apparently bringing a show-and-tell item on a day when it wasn’t scheduled hadn’t been in the plans. Of course not. She obviously had a whole day of Valentine’s craziness prepared. Should he offer to take the pet back home for today?

“Wow, Rylan. Um, what is it?” Ms. Winters took a few steps closer and leaned forward to peer into the plastic box. Then she jerked back, hand to her heart. “Is that a . . . mouse?”

“No.” Rylan giggled and lifted the box higher.

Ms. Winters inched back.

“It’s my hamster, Houdini.”

This time, there was no denying the expression of slight terror that raced across the teacher’s face, followed by a big gulp. Her voice was barely audible as she said, “Oh.”

“I apologize.” Trey stepped forward, hiding part of the cage with his arm. “In the chaos of Julie having me pick up Rylan, I didn’t realize he wasn’t supposed to bring Houdini.”

Ms. Winters’s attention turned to him. “I haven’t met you before. You’re Rylan’s dad?”

“Uncle.” Trey held out a hand. “Trey Jones. Rylan’s dad is still deployed. And his mom caught the nasty bug Rylan had last week.”

Her grip loosened in his. “She’s not coming today?”

“Only if you want her to bring the flu with her.”

“Okay.” She pressed her fingers to her forehead. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Was she supposed to come in today for something?” Trey frowned. Julie hadn’t mentioned needing to be at school today. Just that everything Rylan needed was in his backpack.

“Julie is the room mom who signed up to help with the

Valentine's activities today." Ms. Winters offered a half smile. "But it'll be fine. I mean, I don't have a helper here most days. I can handle it today too."

Yet something in her voice suggested she was on the verge of panicking. Trey stifled a groan. How had he ended up in this predicament? It was his day off. He'd agreed to drop off his nephew, not spend the day herding five-year-olds. Never had he ever imagined offering to do something like that. Even when he was assigned to visit classrooms to talk about fire safety, he let the other firefighters do the talking.

So why was he standing here, contemplating giving up his day of rest to hang out in this wonderland of pink and hearts? For Rylan? No. He wasn't worried about his nephew. For this cute little woman, all bedecked in holiday splendor? Could he be a calming force in this tornado of changes he'd wrought on her carefully laid plans?

He could help her out. He was a firefighter—walked into fires and emergencies all the time. How much harder could this be?

"I'll stay." Trey shrugged. "I told Julie I'd be her today. If that includes being room mom, I guess that means I'm here to help you too."



Deep down inside, Kimberly knew men could do things as well as women. But the very title—room *mom*—indicated it was a job for a female. And she knew nothing about Rylan's uncle except that he brought a rodent on Valentine's Day.

A hamster.

Not a mouse. *Not* a mouse.

Maybe if she repeated that to herself a hundred—million—

times, her heart would quit having flashbacks to her preteen years when her brother Seth had a pet snake. One who liked to eat such creatures. And Seth had loved to torment her with them.

“Ms. Winters?” Rylan tugged on her fingers. “Where should I put Houdini?”

She blinked, took a deep breath, and then scanned the room. Which corner would be the least likely for her to notice during the day? She pointed toward the fish tank.

“Why don’t you set his cage beside our aquarium?”

“Great idea.” Rylan beamed a gap-toothed smile and bounded that way.

His uncle rubbed his hands together and scanned the room as if it held a bomb or something else just as dangerous. “Okay. I’ve obviously never been a room mom before. Can you quickly give me an idea of what you’ll need me to do today?”

“Hi, Ms. Winters.” Caroline held an enormous box in her hands, practically bending in half backward to hold it up. “I made Valentines for everyone in the class. Even you!”

“That’s wonderful, Caroline.” Kimberly gently touched the girl’s shoulder. “Why don’t you see if you can fit that big box in your cubby until it’s time for that part of our day, okay?”

Once the excited girl had rushed across the room, Kimberly returned her attention to the man next to her, the one with very serious hazel eyes. “Guess we better do this quickly before everyone gets here.”

He followed her to the desk and leaned over while she pulled her planner to the front. “Here’s my plan for the day. We always have a schedule for Tuesdays, but since this one is a holiday, I incorporated the Valentine’s theme in each of my lesson plans. I also had to shorten the lesson time, so we’ll have time for our party at the end. It gets a bit crazy, but the kids soak it up.”

She glanced his way to see if he was following her. His eyes were glazed.

He blinked. “I’m a firefighter. Lesson plans are a bit of a foreign language to me.”

“Mostly, I need you as an extra set of hands. It gets a little wild on days like this, as I’m sure you can imagine. Everyone is excited, and they usually eat more sugar than normal. Having an extra adult to ... well ... put out fires, I guess, will be a big help.”

“Putting out fires I can do.” Trey lifted a brow. “Dealing with sugar-hyped kindergarteners?”

“I’m sure you’ll do great.” She glanced at her planner once more, running her finger over the morning schedule. “I guess we’ll squeeze in Rylan’s show-and-tell here. Right before they go to P.E.”

“Sorry again about that.” Trey ran a hand over his closely shorn hair. “I had no idea it wasn’t actually show-and-tell day. Julie didn’t have much energy or voice this morning.”

“It’s fine. One thing we kindergarten teachers know how to do is roll with the punches.” She cut a glance in the direction of the hamster. Rolling with rodents was another thing completely. She muttered, “Despite how it might seem right now.”

Deep breaths. She could not let herself break down over a pest no bigger than her palm—not in front of the students. Or their uncles. She tugged at the end of her braid, whispered a prayer that God would keep that hamster in his cage all day, and then straightened her back to greet four more students.

“Where can I help first?” Trey’s gaze bounced all over the room as if he couldn’t find a safe place for his focus to land.

“How about rescuing that balloon I lost earlier?” She pointed to the ceiling.

“I’m on it.” He didn’t even need to balance on a desktop to reach the end of the string, as she would’ve had to do. How nice was that? Maybe having a guy room mom wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

“Ms. Winters, this is for you.” Nolan handed her a small box.

She took it and knelt to his level before lifting the lid to find sparkly earrings, much longer than she would normally wear. “Wow, Nolan! Did you pick these out yourself?”

He nodded.

“Thank you so much.” She squeezed his arm. “Go put your things in the cubby, okay? We’re going to start soon.”

As the rest of her twenty-five students filed in, all eager to share something with her or show off their treats for later, she soaked it in. This was what the holiday was supposed to be like. All about the children and their happiness.

Several boys congregated with Rylan around his uncle. If Trey was uncomfortable with the attention, he didn’t show it outwardly. Maybe this day wouldn’t be as bad as she’d feared, after all.

Kimberly clapped three times. “Macaroni and cheese.”

The whole class replied, “Everybody freeze.”

Trey lifted a brow, but there was no way he could deny how well it had worked. Every wiggly body in her classroom was still and facing her.

“Please take your seats. We’ve got some extra-fun lessons planned for today to celebrate Valentine’s Day all day long. But we can only do extra-fun things if you’re good listeners. Show me how great you’re going to listen today.”

Only a few whispers and giggles escaped as all the children sat at their desks. Morning announcements crackled over the speaker in the corner, and Kimberly gathered her conversation hearts. Time to sweeten up their math lesson.

“Why do you have chalk candy?” Trey’s whisper in her ear caught her off guard, and several hearts fell to the ground.

She knelt to scoop them up and throw them away. “It’s not made of chalk.”

“Tastes like it.”

“Well, lucky for you, you don’t need to learn graphing, so you won’t have to eat them.”

“Sure about that?” One corner of his lips lifted into enough of a grin to cause a dimple to form. That was unexpected.

What had she been about to say? “Sure about you not needing to learn graphing? Or eating the candy?”

Trey chuckled, and the sound skittered all through her middle. What was going on with her?

He held out his hand so she could give him some of the candy too. “I meant the math, but I can see I’ll have to be careful around you. You can hold your own.”

“Have to be able to around all these kids.”

The kids who now watched her and Trey in the otherwise quiet classroom. How long ago had the announcements finished? She needed to get her head on straight. Just because today was supposed to be a romantic holiday didn’t mean she had to give in to the insanity of the rest of the world. She never had before, and not all records were meant to be broken.

Time to move back into teacher mode and pretend Trey was exactly like his sister Julie.

Except taller.

And with some stubble on his cheeks.

And shorter hair. And a deep voice that had a bit of a rumble to it.

Kimberly’s imagination might not be strong enough for this task.