

# MY TRASHY ROMANCE

by  
Terry Black

## One

He didn't like birds. And that was a problem.

Kelly thought James was a prize catch: tall, personable and easy to talk to. He was fiftyish but looked fortyish, as if she were dating a younger man (instead of someone five years older). He had rugged good looks that weren't stunningly handsome but couldn't be easily ignored—especially his smile, *the* smile, which was coy and knowing and brought out his dimples. She could never resist those dimples.

But James didn't like birds.

“Never cared for them,” he told her frankly, as they were strolling up the walk to her place, at the end of their first real date. She lived in a restored Victorian home, with sloping gables that sparrows loved to nest on. One had been building a nest for days, swiping twigs and bits of flotsam and (she noticed) part of a shredded fast food container, all raw materials for the sparrow's home-in-progress. Kelly admired that, the bird's cunning and resourcefulness, how it cannibalized the old to make something brand new.

*The ultimate recycler*, she thought.

But James wasn't as enamored as she was. “They're filthy animals, really,” he said, shaking his head, as if to dismiss the entire species. “All they do is spread disease, like a bunch of little Typhoid Marys. There's a reason bird flu is called bird flu. You want to track a disease vector, look which way the birds are flying. They're only cute

until you've been infected with something.”

“Can we change the subject?” she asked.

He smiled, showing those dimples again. “I’m sorry, Kelly, I didn’t mean to get all Doctor Paranoid on you. I had a great time tonight, and I hope you did too. And no, in case you’re wondering, I don’t think the best way to get a second date is to be a spokesman for the National Centers for Disease Control.”

Kelly couldn’t help grinning. “I should have known this might happen, when I decided to date a doctor.”

“Occupational hazard,” he admitted. “In fact, I think I may be coming down with something.” He mimed taking his own pulse. “My pulse races and my heart skips a beat, whenever I think of you. Your blue eyes, your chestnut hair streaked with silver, that impish half-smile—I look at you, and I know I’ve got it bad.”

“Oh please,” she said, feigning outrage. “Are you always this corny?”

“Worse. But I should watch the clichés, now that I’m dating a librarian.” James peered at her closely. “I shouldn’t complain, I’ve always liked the bookish type. I half-expect to see you wearing cat’s-eye glasses.”

“I have contact lenses,” she admitted. “For almost four decades, since high school. I’m blind without them.”

“From cataloguing so many tiny-print volumes?”

“Actually, I think my DNA is near-sighted.” She smiled. “But I do like cataloguing—putting the greatest books in history at everyone’s fingertips.”

“What about the not-so-great books?”

“Eye of the beholder,” Kelly said. “Edgar Allan Poe was snubbed by his peers,

who thought he was tawdry and morbid. They said Charles Dickens was too vulgar. Herman Melville was called dull and dreary. The only way to know for sure is to pick up the book and read it yourself.” She shrugged. “Of course, even the books that aren’t classics have their place. I have a soft spot for trashy novelizations—especially if I *haven’t* seen the movie.”

James sighed. “Most of my reading is medical texts, keeping up with the field. From peer-reviewed journals, about things that aren’t very romantic.”

“More on bird flu?”

“Among other things.”

By now they were standing on her front porch, which creaked reassuringly when you mounted the stairs, a sort of subtle welcome-home noise. The lights were out, which meant her roommate wasn’t home, and would likely spend the night elsewhere. Kelly realized they’d reached the awkward part of every first date, the parting at the door, when the unspoken question *Should I ask him inside?* had to be dealt with. Her preference was no, not too soon, but it had to be done with just the right mix of enticement and regret, if she ever wanted to go on Date Number Two.

But not this time. James took her hand in his, kissed it gallantly, and stepped backward. “I’ll say good-night now, Kelly. I have to go, I’m wanted in surgery first thing tomorrow, and I need to be awake and prepared much too early. But I enjoyed tonight, and I hope you’ll do me the honor of a second date.”

“I’d love to,” she said. And meant it.

“Great, call you tomorrow.” He smiled, descended the porch steps, and went back to his car, a classy-but-not-too-show-offy silver Lexus with the personalized license plate

DR FRNDLY. James threw her a wave as he pulled out onto the tree-lined street, careful to avoid the big green trash cans left out by the curb. He drove off at a swift but law-abiding speed.

*He's perfect*, Kelly thought, savoring the scent of his cologne, vaguely minty with a hint of lime. *Except for the fact that he doesn't read for pleasure, and he doesn't like birds.*

Could that be a disqualifier? Surely not.

But she couldn't deny a small feeling of unease.

## Two

*One man's trash, Marty liked to say, is another man's treasure.*

"It's like a Rorschach test," he told Jacobs, his partner, as the big rear-loading trash truck grumbled up the pavement into the plum neighborhood of Rancho Allegro. It was cool but not chilly as they made the turn onto Brahms Street, a quiet bastion of tree-lined suburbia. "No one cares about their garbage, no one's trying to impress you—it's authentic and unfiltered, the best reflection of who they really are."

"And who *you* are," Jacobs shot back, "is one nosy bastard."

"I prefer 'student of human nature.'"

"Well, class begins now," said Jacobs, steering to the curb. "This trash won't empty itself." He lifted the mic of their CB radio and said, "Dispatch, this is Fat Cat, I'm here with Good Sam. We're on Brahms Street, performing our civic beautification agenda, over."

"Fat Cat, this is Dispatch, just empty the damn garbage, over."

"Dispatch, that's what I said. Ten-Four."

Marty hopped out. Both he and Jacobs wore navy coveralls with the GLEASON SANITATION logo on the back. But Jacobs' uniform was baggy and ill-fitting, while Marty's might have come from a tailor's shop—crisp, well-pressed, and form-fitting. They

said he looked half his age, though his graying hair belied the illusion. Marty slapped the activator switch, then retrieved the first can as the truck's backside split open to receive the load.

Marty opened the can and gave its contents a quick once-over. "Pretty standard stuff," he said aloud. "Junk mail, newspapers, wine bottles, worn-out slippers, burnt-out light bulbs." His brow furrowed. "Lots of fast food containers—Mrs. Abernathy doesn't cook for herself much anymore."

Jacobs hoisted another can, dumping its contents into the hopper. "That's fine, Sherlock. But why do you care? I mean, there's more to life than going through an old woman's trash, violating her privacy."

"It's for her own good," Marty said. "Mrs. Abernathy's trash is troubling, because there's been a recent change. And change happens for a reason, which may not be good news."

"Not your problem, Marty."

"She's on my route. I can't help taking an interest."

Marty glanced at the Abernathy home, a single-story cottage with narrow windows, a slate roof and a red-brick fireplace, like something from the English countryside. Sometimes she'd come out and wave, but not today. The curtains were drawn, and the house was dark and still.

They finished unloading, left the cans by the curb, and drove up to the next house—a quaint colonial with caramel trim and an outsized bay window. A stately oak stood in the front lawn, its branches splayed like a giant's fingers. "Can we unload this one without comment, Marty?" Jacobs asked, beseechingly. "I don't want to know how

Mr. and Mrs. Pangborn have adjusted their diet since Tuesday.”

Marty grinned. “A master detective never stops working.”

“And neither do you.”

They continued their route, in companionable silence. By now Jacobs was used to Marty’s signature quirk, playing detective with the trash, and Jacobs’ complaints had grown half-hearted. *Good thing we don’t have a side-loader*, Marty thought, reflecting on the newer machines, where the cans were unloaded using hydraulic grapplers, without any human contact. The new trash trucks were more efficient but much noisier, and the city council of Rancho Allegro had passed an ordinance banning side-loaders—following a rash of noise complaints.

*Just as well*, Marty figured. *What’s the fun of collecting the trash, if you can’t take a look at it first?*

Halfway down the block was an eggshell-white A-frame, with two cars in the driveway, a brown SUV and a Ford sedan with a dented fender—clearly a family home. By the front door was a pair of mud-covered, child-sized boots. Two trash cans stood by the curb, packed to overflowing.

“I’m going to predict the Billings’ garbage,” Jacobs said, pressing a palm to his forehead. “Lunch meat wrappers. Ketchup bottles and condiment jars. Pizza boxes. Ice cream cartons, candy bar wrappers. How am I doing?”

“Not bad,” Marty conceded. “But you missed something.”

He hopped out, opened a can and rummaged through it, producing some crumpled sheets of paper. Jacobs scanned them, frowning. Each sheet had a list of typed questions and clumsily-written answers. At the top was the name *Andy Billings*, and the red word

UNSATISFACTORY.

“They’ve got a boy in the third grade,” said Marty. “He’s failing his classes because he can’t read. It’s a stubborn problem. I’ve been following his progress for weeks, and he’s not improving.”

“Huh.” Jacobs frowned, shrugged, and tossed the sheets back into the can. “Hope someone can help him.”

“Maybe someone can.” Marty pulled a manila envelope from under his seat in the cab. He opened it and pulled out a brightly-colored volume titled *Herbert Hedgehog Goes to Chocolateville—Easy-to-Read Stories for Kids*. The back cover showed a proud mom and dad with an adorable little boy, who was reading Herbert’s adventures out loud.

“You think this will help?” asked Jacobs, turning it over in his hand.

“It helped my niece. She had trouble reading too, until my sister gave her this book.” Marty stuck it back in the envelope, pulled out a pen and wrote *Good luck from the Good Samaritan*. He stuck it in the mailbox and dusted his hands.

“Worth a try,” he said.

They processed the next few homes quickly, with Marty and Jacobs working swiftly and efficiently. Marty kept peering into the cans before dumping them, much to Jacobs’ dismay, but he kept the rest of his deductions to himself—at least, until they reached the last house on Brahms Street.

As always, Marty smiled at the gabled Victorian with crisp hedges and a soaring alder in the front lawn. They were lucky today, because the owner was just leaving for work—a striking woman with sky-blue eyes, and shoulder-length chestnut hair. She wore charcoal slacks, with a blouse of saffron yellow, and smelled of lilacs and honeysuckle.

“Kelly Sharpe,” Marty said. “She’s a goddess.”

“What’s she holding?” asked Jacobs. “Looks like a trash bag.”

They pulled to the curb, just as the lovely Kelly approached them, juggling her purse, car keys, and a half-full Hefty bag. “Can you take one more thing?” she asked, as Marty hopped out of the cab. “Sorry for the inconvenience. I’m late for work and trying to get organized and, well...here.” She thrust the bag in his direction.

“No problem at all, Ma’am,” said Marty, taking the bag. “We’re happy to take it off your hands. All part of the service.”

“Thanks.” She threw him a smile that seemed to brighten the landscape. “You’re very good-natured,” she said, as if surprised that a trash man could be so accommodating. “I like a man who enjoys his work.”

“It’s non-stop fun,” said Marty, thinking, *with a woman like you on the route, that’s truer than you’d think*. “Who needs a dull desk job, when you can spend all day outdoors?”

Kelly shrugged. “I have a desk job, but it’s never dull. I prefer ‘challenging,’ as in ‘challenging my sanity.’” She glanced at her watch. “Speaking of which, I should get moving. Thanks again, uh—”

“Marty.”

“Thanks, Marty. I’m Kelly.” She went to shake hands, realized his hands were full, and settled for a friendly wave. She jumped into her car, a cream-colored Sentra, backed out of the driveway and sped away. But for a single, tantalizing instant, she looked back at Marty with that devastating, sun-bright smile. He sighed with satisfaction, much to his partner’s disdain.

“It’s normally teenagers who do that,” Jacobs said.

“Hey, I’m young at heart. And I take a healthy interest in my clients.” He opened the trash bag and peered inside, critically.

“Okay, getting a little creepy,” Jacobs said.

“Hush.” Marty glanced inside, and sighed with disappointment. “Look at this stuff—cosmetics bottles, scented lotion, shoeboxes for high-end shoes. You know what this means?”

“She’s got class?”

“She’s seeing someone. That’s why she’s making herself beautiful—as if she needed any help.” Marty shook his head, with a twinge of regret. “I wish her well. But I can’t help wondering...”

“If your goddess would date a garbageman?”

Marty smiled ruefully and hoisted the trash into the big truck’s hopper. But he spared a moment for a last, searching glance at the home of his goddess, before he climbed back into the cab and they moved on to the next house.

*That’s me, he thought. Always wishing for the impossible.*

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