

HALF WAY HOME

It was warm inside the bus due to the hour of the day as she settled her polyester self onto the red vinyl that covered the bench. The sun was high in the sky turning it that pale shade of blue that bordered on white in the desert. Her feet ached from the breakfast and lunch shift at Dot's Diner but she didn't want to dwell on that now. Instead she held tight to the purse that held her winnings from Bingo. She played religiously each week putting the money aside so that one day she might have enough to buy some answers. She tucked her hand inside to touch it, making sure it hadn't disappeared like Howard. It wouldn't be a long ride, only a few blocks out of her way, she shifted in her seat, her uniform moist against her body from the heat of Phoenix.

"Bye Wally," she said over her shoulder as she exited the bus heading toward Encanto Boulevard. There on the tinted glass door in white vinyl lettering was the name Jack Blunt, Private Investigator. She paused, as her stomach began to tingle, nerves popping as she put her hand on the warm steel handle and pulled the door open.

Jack Blunt was sitting there in his white shirt sleeves, a pad of yellow legal paper, pen in hand, he stopped scribbling midsentence. He had a thick head of hair, graying at the temples with just a hint of wave that made it fall perfect about his face. Behind him in a large, mirrored curio cabinet where five golden statuettes.

"You must be Jane Percy," he said with a pleasant grin. "Have a seat."

She released a pent up breath as she smoothed the fabric of her dress with her sweaty palms and sat down. "What are the awards for?" She asked easing into the fog of small talk.

"Those are my Emmy's. I used to write for TV. Maybe you've seen the show, *Nun with a*

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Gun?”

“No, it doesn’t ring a bell,” she said shaking her head.

“*Packing heat beneath her habit for righteous reasons,*” he added with a hint of hope for some artistic recognition.

“No. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of it. But then again, I don’t watch much TV. How did you end up here in Phoenix working as a private investigator?”

“Well, after the show ended I began to think that perhaps life could imitate art. I was good at solving crimes on paper. Why not try it for real? I had to reinvent myself. I chose Phoenix for the dry heat and those smoldering sunsets my ex turned me on to before the love ran out. Enough about me though. Let’s talk about how I can help you.”

“It’s my fiancé, Howard Dupre. He’s disappeared. On February 14th I waited all morning for him to pick me up in the blue Cadillac he’d inherited from his mother. We were going to drive to Las Vegas to be married at the Little White Wedding House. He never arrived,” she said emotion creeping into her voice.

He tugged a tissue from the box on his desk handing it to her. “Maybe he got cold feet? He certainly wouldn’t be the first man to ditch a date at the Altar. Did you try calling him?”

“No. You see, he lived with his sister, Jamie Dupre on Cherry Lane and Howard wanted to keep our relationship a secret until after the wedding. She was quite dependent on him and he was afraid how she would re-act. He told me never to call the house. I walked by there every day for two weeks straight in a large brimmed hat and dark sunglasses. His car is there but it hasn’t been moved. I went to the pawn shop where he worked and Pete, that’s his boss, told me he just quit showing up. Finally I went to the police station to see if they would classify him as a missing person. They told me no. Some people just don’t want to be found and there’s no crime

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in that,” she said dabbing at her eyes and nose, mopping up the sorrow of lost love. “I know he loved me. He called me the night before and told me he couldn’t wait to make me his wife and see me in the pearl negligée he picked out.”

Jack lowered his eyes and rubbed the cleft in his chin with his fingers, flustered by the sudden intimacy of the details she offered. Jane Percy had a workaday face, the type that could easily be lost in a crowd, but her genuine sense of loss and concern tugged on his sentimental side. “That certainly doesn’t sound like a man trying to get out of a marriage.”

“I’m afraid something terrible has happened to him. I have money. I’ve been saving my bingo winnings. It was our game. We even had a lucky number, B45. We used to play every Wednesday at St. Ignatius. I hope it’s enough,” she said reaching into her bag.

“Let’s not worry about the money right now. I should be able to figure out pretty fast if he’s still alive. Where did you say he worked?” he asked reaching for his pen.

“The Heirloom Pawn on West Ninth.”

“I’ll need his sister’s address and a photograph of him if you have one.”

“Yes, of course,” she said rifling through her billfold.” She laid it on the desk. “He’s quite attractive,” she said, her eyes locked tight onto the picture not wanting to let go.

Jack Blunt picked it up and surveyed Mr. Howard Dupre. His hair was ash colored with a receding hairline which he tried to conceal with a poorly executed comb over. He wore thick glasses, the frames wide rectangular tortoise shell that rested on his turned up, narrow nose. Behind the goofy smile, small teeth that looked like yellow pebbles. It was a face for radio. “I’ll start at the pawn shop, see what I can dig up,” he said as he tucked the photograph into his breast pocket.

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Sleigh bells jangled as Jack pushed open the door to the Heirloom Pawn shop. It was musty and warm, the thermostat set outside of comfort's reach. The carpet was aged, the fibers worn thin and frayed by the shoes of those down on their luck, stuck in tight places searching for a way out. A jukebox, Tuba, Samurai sword, a bronze of Elvis, Civil War uniform, a replica of George Washington's wooden teeth, a cannon with balls, Indian headdress, a meat grinder, a deck of original Playboy playing cards with the cellophane intact.

Jack waded through the eclectic collection that filled the space, possessions that changed hands many times over, like the air we breathe. The jewelry, protestations of love, filled the locked cases with no lovers in sight. They must have all evaporated into thin air like a summer rain. He thought of his ex and on whose hand her wedding ring ended up. He missed the sound of her buttering his toast and the way she polished her toenails in bed in the evening. The melancholy of his marriage's demise swelled inside of him, so he moved along to electronics where the merchandise wasn't nearly so sentimental. Eventually he made his way back toward the front of the store and approached the man behind the counter. He was heavy set with an olive complexion and a black mustache that was waxed into handlebars. His cheeks were faintly pocked, his eyes round and dark, on his head a cockeyed Red Sox baseball cap.

"Welcome to Heirloom Pawn. Anything I can help you find?" he said with a crooked smile.

"Yes, I'm Jack Blunt, a private investigator," he said dropping his card on the glass countertop.

The curve of his smile headed south as he shook his head, "I don't know anything about that Jamaican transvestite and the truck load of Uzi's."

Jack held his hand up. "Relax chief. As incredibly interesting as that all sounds, it's not

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why I'm here. I'm looking for Howard Dupre. I understand he used to work here. His fiancée Jane Percy has hired me to track him down."

"Howie, yeah, he worked here going on twenty years. Nice guy, great employee. Honest as the day is long, that's hard to find in this business."

"Did he quit?" Jack asked.

"I guess you could say that. He took a week off. Told me he was going to Vegas to get married. Then he never came back. I called his house, spoke with his sister, she said he went to Florida to help some relatives. I was pissed. I didn't expect that from him," he said as he twirled the large chunky gold pinky ring on his right hand.

"So, you haven't seen or heard from Howard since February."

"That's right."

"Did you know his fiancée Jane Percy?"

"Yeah, she'd come by every now and then. Quiet as a church mouse she was, but they weren't fooling me. They were playing at more than Bingo on Wednesday nights."

"Oh? What makes you think so?" Jack asked.

"I read people for a living. They knew each other in the biblical sense, if you know what I mean. It was written all over their faces and every Thursday Howie was like a new man," he said with a smirk and a nod.

"Did they only see each other on Wednesdays?"

"Yes. His sister had him on a short leash. Bingo at the church was the only night he had to himself, otherwise he was at home working around the house and keeping his sister company. She had that obnoxious parrot. Howie hated that bird. It was noisy and messy and it was his job to clean up after it. He was excited to marry Jane and move into her apartment."

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“Is there anything else you can think of that I should know about?” Jack asked.

“Now that you mention it, the sister came in here about two months after he disappeared with a ring. She wanted to trade it for a cement mixer and a concrete cutter. The ring is still here somewhere. I’ll show it to you.”

He unlocked the case and pulled the ring out. It was a princess cut diamond solitaire set flush into a 14 karat white gold band about a quarter of an inch thick, modest yet elegant.

Jack pulled it off the black velvet display and looked at it closely. Engraved on the inside was B45. “Did she mention where she got it? Any history?” he asked.

“Everything that comes through that door has a story behind it and frankly most of the time I don’t want to know. She told me it belonged to her mother,” he said replacing the ring.

“When she came in did you talk about Howard?”

“I asked. She gave me the same song and dance about the relatives in Florida. She’s a strange bird, I’ll tell you that. She was a Marine, if that means anything to you. I still can’t believe he’d walk out on me. It doesn’t make sense. But, what can I do?” he said with a shrug.

“Do you know if his sister knew they were going to marry?”

“No, I don’t. I do know he was nervous about telling her. He kept putting it off. She had quite the temper.”

“Do you think he was afraid of her?”

“Oh sure, a mild mannered guy like Howie. She’d squash him like a bug.”

Jack Blunt parked his Buick LaSabre two doors down from the house on Cherry Lane that Howard Dupre shared with his sister and cut the engine. The biggest challenge to surveillance is noticing everything around you without getting noticed yourself. He lowered the window and lit

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a Winston, settling in for a long afternoon, on the seat beside him a glazed donut sprinkled with Jimmies and a small pair of binoculars. It was your run of the mill street in an average middle class neighborhood.

The donut was inches from his mouth when the carport door opened and a brawny figure emerged, her eyes darting up and down the street as she headed toward the trash bin along the side of the house. She removed the lid, placing it on the ground before going back inside the house leaving the door open. He reached for the binoculars and waited. It wasn't long before she came back out carrying what appeared to be something heavy by the strain of her arms and the burden on her face. She strode to the trash bin and heaved the object into it with a nasty clunk. She bent down to retrieve the lid, replacing it before dusting off the front of her shirt and jeans as she made her way back inside.

He stayed put as the shadows lengthened then disappeared altogether. It was a dark night and when he felt the hour was late enough, he quietly inched his way toward the trash bin. He lifted the lid and shone the small ray of his flashlight down inside. It was a block of concrete about the size of a shoebox. He replaced the lid and slipped off into the darkness surrounded by the incessant buzz of cicadas.

The white picket fence on Cherry Lane fostered a vision of stability as Jack Blunt made his way along the walk wondering what truth was behind the illusion as purple pansies shimmied in the breeze in the flower bed that led to the front door. He wrapped his knuckles on the red door and waited, noting the immaculate condition of the entry and the outgoing Publisher's Clearing House envelope clothes pinned to the mailbox, which gave him an idea.

Jamie Dupre pulled open the door with the universal expression of suspicion at uninvited

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guests. She wore a denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up and its tails tucked into Levi's that were too tight and on her feet, spit shined combat boots. Her white hair was cropped close to her head, a long nose pointed down toward her full round lips that weren't quick to smile.

"I'm looking for Howard Dupre. Does he live here?"

"Who wants to know?" She asked.

"I'm Jack Blunt, with Publisher's Clearing House," he said with the smooth sincere delivery of a preacher.

"Oh really, how exciting have we won?" She gushed. "Please come in," she said pulling the door open wide and turning her back to him as she made her way into the antiquated room. He followed the tall, boxy figure which was devoid of any feminine trait. She sat down in a plaid Barcalounger, reached for the remote and muted the sound of the television. "Have a seat," she said motioning toward a chair that matched the one she occupied.

He eased into the chair, the plastic cover, squeaking as he adjusted his weight. Near the window was a large birdcage with a Macaw inside, its black beak the size of Jack's fist.

"Is Howard here?" Jack asked as his eyes circled the space. "I need to deliver his winnings in person."

"Unfortunately he's not. He took the Am Track train to Florida to help some elderly relatives downsize," she said fondling a key that hung around her neck on a shoelace. "He's up to his elbows in collectible spoons and porcelain Hummel's. Our Aunt and Uncle aren't coping well with the parting of their treasures. There's no telling how long it could take. Couldn't I just sign to accept his winnings? I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Am Track, now that's an interesting way to travel," he replied hoping to keep her tongue wagging long enough to elicit as many details as he could before blowing his cover.

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“Yes. Howard had a fear of flying.”

“This is a nice piece of property you have. How long have you been here?” Jack asked.

“This was mother’s house. She died quite some time ago and left it to me and Howard. She worked as a legal secretary after Dad died on that hiking trip through the Grand Canyon. He was quite a bit older than her. She wanted to keep busy and secretarial work was her vice,” she said reaching for her can of Mountain Dew.

“And you? What kind of work do you do?” Jack asked.

“I served in the Marine Corp.”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” the Macaw blurted.

“Cleopatra, hush. Corp of Engineering, twenty years retired. Semper Fi!” she roared.

He watched as she spoke with her hands, gestures that somehow served as animators for the details that were her life. She was an open book as so often the lonely are. For his part he inserted the trivial responses, the occasional nod of his head in sympathy, empathy, or agreement along with the leading questions that kept the dreaded trap of silence at bay.

He rose from the chair, peeling himself away from the plastic and then walked toward the birdcage. Beside it was a tiger oak end table upon which stood an ornate pewter candlestick, its square base a collage of carved scenes. “I can’t help but notice this candlestick. I’m somewhat of an antique buff,” he said picking it up to examine it closer. “This is an immaculate piece. Where did you find it?” He asked.

“Oh, I have no idea,” she said waving him off. “It belonged to mother. It’s been resting on that table as long as I can remember. Do you think it’s valuable?” She asked.

“If it’s part of a pair it is. Do you happen to have its twin?” he asked hopefully.

“I do as a matter of fact, in the basement. I’ll go get it,” she said hoisting herself from the

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chair. She hurried toward the door that led to the basement slipping the key from around her neck as she went. She paused, fingers fumbling as the key finally hit its mark. She opened the door and reached up to pull the string that lit the bare bulb lighting her way down the steep steps. "I'll be right back," she said over her shoulder.

Jack walked over to the bird and whispered, "Where's Howard?"

"He went to live with Jesus," Cleopatra said.

"When?" he asked as though the bird understood him. Silence. "Jane Percy," he added.

"Jane Percy's a tramp," she squawked.

"What's in the basement?" Jack asked.

"Don't go in the basement," the bird sang as gold feathers ruffled along its breast down to the grey scaly talons that clung to the branch, the sharp nails looking like the tips of tiny screws.

"Howard's wedding," Jack said watching the bird closely.

"Over her dead body," Cleo screeched cocking its black beak.

"B45," he whispered.

"Half way home. Half way home."

"Thanks, Cleo. You've been very helpful," he said staring intently into the piercing pinhole eyeball of the bird which was surrounded by zebra like stripes, the sound of Jamie ascending the steps in the distance. He turned to watch her as she re-locked the basement door and returned the key around her neck.

"Here it is," she said running her fingers around the edge of the base as though she was trying to wipe something off before handing it to him.

He noticed her red irritated masculine hands as they released the heavy candlestick into his own. He examined the length of it playing his part to perfection while his eyes were drawn to the

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base looking for damage. There it was, one of the sharp edges was dented as though it had struck against something or someone.

“Oh, this is a shame, look here. This one has been damaged. Can you see the dent?” He asked holding it up to her face.

She pulled a pair of readers out of the pocket of her shirt and settled them on the bridge of her nose. “Yes, I see it. I don’t have any idea how that happened,” she offered.

“I didn’t expect you would. But it affects the value of the set. I’m afraid I won’t be interested after all,” he said placing the candlestick next to its mate on the table before going back to the chair and positioning himself on the edge, elbows on knees, his chin cradled in his palms.

“Do you happen to have a phone number where I can reach Howard?”

“I’m afraid not. You see, he suffers from phonophobia. He won’t go anywhere near a telephone,” she replied.

“Do you know a Jane Percy, by chance?” He asked.

“Jane Percy’s a tramp,” screeched the bird as she ruffled her feathers wide.

Jamie’s head snapped toward the bird as her face flushed red, eyes wide and lips pursed.

“Why? What would she have to do with Howard winning the sweepstakes?” she asked facing him.

“Interestingly enough, she was telling me about a phone call she received from Howard the day before you claim he left for Florida. That doesn’t jive with your story that he has a fear of telephones,” he said watching for her reaction.

“Who are you?” she barked.

“I’m Jack Blunt a private investigator hired by Jane Percy to find Howard.”

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“Jane Percy’s a tramp,” repeated the bird.

“Shut up, Cleo,” she shouted. “What is it you want from me?”

“I find it curious that Cleopatra here has such an unfavorable opinion of your brothers’ fiancée. Where is he really? I don’t believe he’s in Florida and I noticed you mentioned his fear of flying in the past tense. I also know you traded a wedding ring at the pawn shop for a cement mixer and a concrete cutter. I see the dusty footprints of your boots along the floor from when you came up from the basement. Concrete is very dusty. What exactly are you up to down there?” he asked.

“That ring was my mother’s. It had nothing to do with Howard. I’m working on a sculpture if you must know. It’s an artistic endeavor, one that I’m not ready to share with the yet. As for Howard, I told you he’s in Florida.”

“I checked with Am Track. Howard Dupre never purchased a ticket on or near the day you say he traveled. And as for the ring, it was engraved B45.”

“Half way home,” sang the bird.

“That was Howard and Jane’s lucky number when they played bingo each Wednesday at the church. Half way home is the bingo call for B45. That ring was obviously meant for Jane Percy’s finger. Tell me, what’s in the block of concrete you threw away last night?” he asked, lowering his voice as he watched the blood drain from her square jaw as her shoulders slumped. He diverted his eyes from her, allowing her some space to digest the facts that he had so meticulously gathered. The Macaw cracked nuts in the background, playing with the silence between them.

Her head buried in her hands, she released a deep sigh.

“He told me he was going to marry her the next day and I lost it. He was all I had. I didn’t

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want to be alone here in this house without him but in the end that's exactly how I ended up. I flew into a rage, out of my mind with envy and struck him in the head from behind with the candlestick. He died instantly, I hit him so hard. I dragged the body to the basement," she said with a shudder of horror at the memory.

She raised her head, leaning it back against the chair and closed her eyes. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be so different? Howard was my buffer against the world. His presence here kept all the questions at bay. It wasn't right. He deserved better," she said, her voice a steady monotone of fact.

Jack Blunt entered Dot's Diner and planted himself on a stool at the counter dreading the report he was going to have to convey. He lit a Winston, exhaling as Jane Percy approached with a harried expression of anxiety on her face and a coffee pot in her hand.

"I just heard the news. Is it true?" She begged.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Could you sit down so that we can talk?"

"Yeah, sure. Betsy cover for me for a few minutes," she said putting the coffee pot back and seating herself on the stool beside him.

"Oh, dear God," she said shaking her head no. "All these months wondering, I've vacillated between hope and despair so many times. What happened?" She asked her face a pleading portrait of agony.

"She killed him in a jealous rage the night before the two of you were to marry. He died from blunt force trauma to the head. I'm sorry." He watched as she wrung her dishpan hands together, her face a kaleidoscope of emotion as she struggled internally to rein all of it in. In the placid stillness of her heartache he sighed before taking another drag of his cigarette.

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“I have something for you. Jamie asked me to buy it back from the pawn shop. She wanted you to have it,” he said as he pulled a small velvet box from his pocket and handed it to her.

She opened it and removed the ring, her fingers shaking as she held it up in the light, her face softened and her eyes welled as she read the inscription softly, “ B45,” before slipping it onto her left finger to marvel at it.

“It’s lovely isn’t it? The hardest part for me was the not knowing. Did I imagine our love? This ring is my proof that I didn’t and that he wanted to make me his wife. Now that I know, I think I can carry on. It won’t be easy but easier, if that makes any sense.”

Jack reached out his left hand and placed it on top of her right giving it a tender squeeze. “Sure it does Jane.”