FIVE MILLION REASONS

By Carl J. England

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CHAPTER ONE

Hook, Line and Sinker

Jackie Blackmon’s jeans’ pocket exploded with the sound of 80’s arcade music. His ringtone was a single-bit rendition of the Pac-Man theme and he was getting really tired of that song. Unfortunately, Jackie was technologically disadvantaged when it came to cell phones, so he could either continue to endure Pac-Man or he could (perish the thought!) learn how to change the ringtone himself.

The phone, once freed from the confines of Jackie’s jeans, displayed the caller’s name—Doris. Jackie pressed the cancel button and dropped the instrument back into his pocket. Almost immediately he received a notification chime alerting him that the caller had left a voicemail. Within seconds, the chime was followed by another rendition of Pac-Man’s theme, which Jackie ignored. After another voicemail notification, the music began again.

After the music faded, there was a delay before a different chime sounded, announcing that Jackie had received a text message. “Damn you, Doris,” he muttered as he reached into his pocket to retrieve the phone. The text read: *Answer your damn phone. This is important!*

Of course it was important—it was always important. Everything that Doris did or said was important—to her. Jackie glared at the message, waiting for the phone to ring—and waited—and waited. When the phone did finally ring, Jackie had just returned it to his pocket. “Hello Doris,” he growled.

“Why didn’t you call me back? I left you a text message. I said it was Important.” Jackie could literally hear the capitalization in the word *Important*.

“You also told me to answer my damn phone. You didn’t tell me to call you.”

“Shit Jackie! Are we gonna play games? I said it was important. If I tell you that your house is on fire, are you gonna just sit there and wait for me to invite you outside? Hell! *You* probably would. You’d just stand there arguing Semitics while the whole damn place burned down around you.”

“Semantics.”

“What?”

“I think you meant *semantics*. Semitic has something to do with the Hebrew language.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’re going to argue Semitic/semantic until your whole house goes up in flames.”

“My house isn’t burning Doris; forget about semantics. What’s so damned important?”

“I can’t talk about it over the phone.”

“Why not?”

“Somebody might be listening.”

“Who’s going to be listening?”

“Just get over here. It’s Important.”

“Doris, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Get your ass over here. This *really* is important.”

“Let me guess—You’ve got a restraining order and there are a couple of cops waiting to lock me up when I knock on your door.”

“Come on, Jackie. You know me better than that. I wouldn’t ever call the cops on you. I just need you to come over here. There’s something Important we need to discuss.”

“Okay, I’ll come. But first, you’ll have to send me a text message asking me to come over.”

“What? Why do you want a text message?”

“When the cops lock me up, I want proof that you asked me to be there. I don’t want to waste a perfectly good Saturday afternoon in jail.”

“Jackie, you hurt me. But if you don’t trust me, I’ll send you that message. Just get over here, okay?”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

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When Jackie arrived at Doris’ apartment, he did a quick search of the neighborhood for police cars before knocking. He was barely inside the door when he noticed Doris’ nephew sitting on the sofa playing video games. “No way!” Jackie protested. “I am not babysitting J.T. while you go out for the evening.”

“Mario!” came a shout from the sofa.

“What’s Mario?” asked Jackie.

Doris supplied the answer. “J.T. only answers to Mario, now. Last week, it was Alex Kidd.”

“Alex Kidd?”

From the sofa: “My name is Mario.”

“Is that all he ever does, play video games?” asked Jackie. “And why don’t you ever get any new games? Aren’t those games all from the 80’s?”

“Those are the game systems that me and Boris had when we were kids,” replied Doris. “I got them when Daddy passed away.”

“Yeah, I know. You got the game systems and all of Morris’ books. Boris got the house and car and everything else. Do you really think that was fair? Morris, Boris, Doris. What was with all those *I-S* names?”

“Me and Boris are twins. Our names are supposed to rhyme.”

“No, it’s more than just you and Boris. What was your mom’s name again?”

“You know my mom’s name.”

“Come on. Morris, Boris, Doris and what was your mom’s name?”

“You know it was Doloris. What the hell are you getting at?”

“Just that your family is weird.”

Doris’ retort was indignant. “If we’re going to start trashing each other’s families I could go on all day about yours, but we’ve got more important things we need to talk about.”

“Yeah? What do we have to talk about?”

For an answer, Doris slipped a business card into Jackie’s hand.

Jackie read aloud, “Kirby and Kirby—Private Investigators.” He dropped the card on the coffee table. “Why the hell do you need a private investigator?”

“I’ve got five million reasons for needing a private dick. Ain’t you gonna ask me who Kirby and Kirby are?”

“Okay Doris, I’ll bite. Who are Kirby and Kirby?”

“We’re Kirby and Kirby.”

“You’re Kirby and Kirby? You and who else?”

Doris pointed first at Jackie and then at herself. “We’re Kirby and Kirby. You and me.”

“Doris, you’re crazy. We’re not private investigators. You’ve got to have some kind of training to be a private investigator. I think you have to be an ex-cop or something. I’m an industrial electrician, and you wait tables at The Pancake Palace. We don’t know anything about being private investigators.”

“It can’t be all that hard. You get a case, you track down leads, and you nail the perpetrator. I’ve been reading books.”

“I know what books you’ve been reading. You’ve been reading those dime-store detective novels that your dad kept all those years. Detective work isn’t that easy. Even in those cheap novels the detectives had contacts in the police department. We don’t have any contacts—at least, I don’t have any contacts. Do you know somebody on the police force?”

“No, I ain’t got no contacts, but I do know how to ask questions. I can get answers.”

“If we’re going to pretend to be detectives, why can’t we use our real names? Why do we have to be Kirby and Kirby?”

“Because our real name is Blackmon. That sounds too much like Black Man. You think that if we advertised as Blackmon and Blackmon that we’d get any real business? Ain’t nobody gonna hire no colored detectives.”

Jackie flopped down on the sofa beside *Mario*. “Doris, you are certifiably insane. It wouldn’t matter if we *were* black, people *do* hire black detectives.”

“There ain’t no colored private dicks in the books I’ve read.”

“That’s because those books were written back in the thirties—and they weren’t believable even back then. Another thing you should know is that nobody has used the word *colored* since the fifties. The people you are referring to are either Black or African-American.”

“Daddy always called them colored except when he called them—”

Jackie interrupted, “I know what Morris called them, and *everyone* finds that word offensive. I don’t want to hear it and J.T. doesn’t need to hear it. And why the hell are you talking so weird? You sound just like the women in those dime-store novels.” Jackie paused. “You sound just like those women in your dad’s books. You’ve read so many of those damn books that they’ve fried your brain.”

“Come on, Jackie. Ain’t you gonna even ask why we have to be private detectives?”

“Where did you get the name Kirby? Are we named after a vacuum cleaner or a video game?”

“I ain’t never heard of no vacuum cleaner named Kirby.”

“To be honest with you, Doris, I’m a little surprised that you even know what a vacuum cleaner is.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny. Now ask me why we have to be private eyes.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking. Doris, why do we need to be private detectives?”

“I’m very glad you asked. I know of a detective job that is worth millions. All we have to do is land the client.”

“Why do you want me in on this job of yours? Why don’t you just land that client by yourself?”

“Because detectives are always men. Sometimes they have a female partner, but it’s the men that the client trusts.”

“More wisdom from your outdated detective novels?”

“That, and you have a car.”

“Don’t you have a car? What happened to that Ford you were driving?”

“They came and got it. I bought it from one of those pay-by-the-week places. I quit paying after the police took my license away. Said I was doing sixty in a thirty-mile zone. I don’t believe that car could even do sixty.”

“Come on, Doris. They don’t take your license for speeding. What else did you do?”

“I may have drank a glass of wine before I got in the car.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah, just one—okay, maybe it was one of those really big glasses. But I wasn’t drunk.”

“Why don’t you get your brother to play detective with you?”

“You already know why I don’t want Boris in on this case with me. When Daddy passed away, Boris got the house and the car and all the money. All I got was those books and these damn video games. If I ask Boris to help me, he’ll just rob me blind. He’ll get all the money and leave me holding the bag. I know that you’ll be fair with me. You always have been. We were always good together.”

“We were never good together, Doris. We were married for five years and that was about four and a half years too long.”

“But Jackie, we were *always* good in bed. Wasn’t I always good in bed?”

“Do you really think the kid needs to be hearing this?”

“The name’s Mario,” interjected the kid.

Doris ignored the interruption. “Come on, Jackie. Do this one last thing for me and I’ll never ask you for a favor again.”

“Can we finish the job in two weeks?”

“What happens in two weeks?”

“That’s when our divorce is final.”

“It don’t have to be final. We’ve still got time to back out.”

“No Doris, it has to be final. It absolutely *has* to be final. Who is this client that you’ve got lined up and how much money do you really think we can collect?”

“I don’t know who the client is, but Denise—she’s a cook where I work. Denise has a sister who is married to a guy whose brother’s girlfriend—”

Jackie stood. “Look Doris, I’m out. I don’t trust any information that has passed through that many hands.”

“No Jackie, this is legit. The girlfriend works for a company that had five million dollars stolen and they are looking to hire a private dick to recover the money. They will pay a recovery fee of five percent. That’s a cool quarter of a mil. Half of that is yours. I’ve already spent too much money to back out now.”

“What did those business cards cost? Ten dollars? Twenty? I’ll give you twenty just to forget the whole damn thing.”

“Five thousand.”

“Holy shit!—Sorry Mario—You spent five grand on business cards?”

“No. Don’t be stupid. I only spent ten bucks on the cards but I had to rent us an office.”

“You spent five grand on an office? What the hell do we need an office for?”

“The office was thirty-five hundred. I spent another five hundred renting office furniture and getting our names painted on the door—looks real professional.”

“That’s only four thousand. Where’d the other thousand go?”

“Hell Jackie, I didn’t have four grand so I had to borrow it from Boris. He would only lend me the money if I agreed to pay back another thousand in interest.”

“I know that I’m not going to want to hear the answer, but I’ll ask again. What the hell do we need an office for?”

“We’ve got to have some place to meet the client. He ain’t gonna hire no private dick who works out of his home. We’ve got to look legit.” Doris picked up the business card. “I gave one of these to Denise and she gave it to her sister and she gave it to her husband and he gave it to his brother and he gave it to his girlfriend and the client called yesterday and we’re supposed to meet with him at nine o’clock Monday morning. At least, be there Monday when I meet with the client. If we crack this case we’ll be able to retire.”

“We can’t retire on a quarter of a million dollars. That’s only one hundred and twenty-five thousand for each of us. Two year’s salary for me. Not nearly enough to retire on. But I’ll be there Monday.”

Doris picked up a stack of dusty paperbacks and offered them to Jackie. “Read these. That way you’ll know how to talk like a detective.”

Jackie shook his head. “There is no way I’m going to talk like the characters in those books. Real detectives don’t talk like that now and I doubt that they ever did.”