

Sue Grafton

"I"

is for  
Innocent

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Published by Henry Holt and Company, Inc.,

115 West 18th Street, New York, New York 10011.

Published in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited,

91 Granton Drive, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 2N5.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grafton, Sue.

"T" is for innocent / Sue Grafton.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Title.

PS3557.R1312 1992

91-45165

813'.54—dc20

CIP

ISBN 0-8050-1085-8

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or book excerpts can also be created to specification.

For details contact:

Special Sales Director, Henry Holt and Company, Inc.,

115 West 18th Street, New York, New York 10011.

Designed by Lucy Albanese

Printed in the United States of America

Recognizing the importance of preserving the written word,  
Henry Holt and Company, Inc., by policy, prints all of its  
first editions on acid-free paper.∞

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

*For my granddaughter, Erin,  
with a heart full of love.*

## Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the following people: Steven Humphrey; Sam Eaton, Attorney-at-Law; B. J. Seebol, J.D.; John Mackall, Attorney-at-Law; Debra Young, Attorney-at-Law; Joe Driscoll, Joe Driscoll & Associates Investigations; Lieutenant Terry Bristol and Sergeant Carol Hesson, Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department; Detective Lawrence Gillespie, Coroner's Bureau, Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department; Eric S. H. Ching; Debby Davison, KEYT-TV; Richard Dodge, Far West Gun & Supply; Charles Sunderlin, Premier Products Manager, Heckler & Koch; George E. Rush; Florence Michel; David Elder; and Carter Blackmar.

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I feel compelled to report that at the moment of death, my entire life did not pass before my eyes in a flash. There was no beckoning white light at the end of a tunnel, no warm fuzzy feeling that my long-departed loved ones were waiting on The Other Side. What I experienced was a little voice piping up in an outraged tone, “Oh, come on. You’re not serious. This is really *it*?” Mostly, I regretted I hadn’t tidied my chest of drawers the night before as I’d planned. It’s painful to realize that those who mourn your untimely demise will also carry with them the indelible image of all your tatty underpants. You might question the validity of the observation since it’s obvious I didn’t die when I thought I would,

but let's face it, life is trivial, and my guess is that dying imparts very little wisdom to those in process.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a licensed private investigator operating out of Santa Teresa, which is ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles. For the past seven years, I'd been running my own small agency adjacent to the home offices of California Fidelity Insurance. My agreement with the company entitled me to the use of an attractive corner suite in exchange for the investigation of arson and wrongful death claims on an "as needed" basis. In early November, that arrangement was abruptly terminated when a hotshot efficiency expert was transferred to Santa Teresa from the CF branch office in Palm Springs.

I hadn't thought I'd be affected by the change in company management since I was operating as an independent contractor instead of a bona fide California Fidelity employee. However, at our first (and only) meeting, this man and I took an instant dislike to each other. In the fifteen minutes that constituted our entire relationship, I was rude, pugnacious, and uncooperative. The next thing I knew I was out on the street with my client files packed up in assorted cardboard boxes. Let's not even mention the fact that my association with CF had culminated in the wholesale bust-up of a multi-million-dollar auto insurance scam. All *that* netted me was a surreptitious handshake from Mac Voorhies, the company vice-president and avowed chickenheart, who assured me he was just as appalled by this guy as I was. While I appreciated the support, it didn't solve my problem. I needed work. I needed an office in which to do the work. Aside from the fact that my apartment was too small to serve the purpose, it felt unprofessional. Some of my clients are unsavory characters and I didn't want those bozos to know where I lived. I had troubles enough. With the recent sharp rise in property taxes, my landlord had been forced to double my rent. He'd been more upset about the hike than I had, but according to his accountant, he'd had no choice. The rent was still very



reasonable and I had no complaints, but the increase couldn't have come at a more awkward time. I had used my savings to pay for my "new" car, a 1974 VW—this one pale blue, with only one minor ding in the left rear fender. My living expenses were modest, but I still didn't have a sou left at the end of the month.

I've heard that no one gets fired without secretly hoping for the liberation, but that sounds like the kind of pronouncement you make before you've been given the boot. Being fired is the pits, ranking right up there with infidelity in its brutalizing effect. The ego recoils and one's self-image is punctured like a tire by a nail. In the weeks since I'd been terminated, I'd gone through all the stages one suffers at the diagnosis of a soon-to-be-fatal disease: anger, denial, bargaining, drunkenness, foul language, head colds, rude hand gestures, anxiety, and eating disorders of sudden onset. I'd also entertained a steady stream of loathsome thoughts about the man responsible. Lately, however, I'd begun to wonder if it wasn't true, this notion of a repressed desire to be unceremoniously shit-canned. Maybe I was bored with CF. Maybe I was burned out. Maybe I was simply longing for a change of scene. Whatever the truth, I'd begun to adjust and I could feel the optimism rising through my veins like maple syrup. It was more than a matter of survival. One way or another, I knew I'd *prevail*.

For the time being, I was renting a spare room in the law offices of Kingman and Ives. Lonnie Kingman is in his early forties, five foot four, 205 pounds, a weight-lifting fanatic, perpetually pumped up on steroids, testosterone, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and caffeine. He's got a shaggy head of dark hair, like a pony in the process of shedding a winter coat. His nose looks like it's been busted about as often as mine has. I know, from the various degrees framed and hung on his wall, that he received a B.A. from Harvard and an M.B.A. from Columbia, and then graduated *summa cum laude* from Stanford Law School.

His partner, John Ives, while equally credentialed, prefers the quiet, nonglamorous aspects of the practice. His forte is appellate civil work, where he enjoys a reputation as an attorney of uncommon imagination, solid research, and exceptional writing skills. Since Lonnie and John established the firm some six years ago, the support staff has expanded to include a receptionist, two secretaries, and a paralegal who doubles as a runner. Martin Cheltenham, the third attorney in the firm, while not a formal partner, is Lonnie's best friend, leasing office space from him in the same way I do.

In Santa Teresa, all the flashy cases seem to go to Lonnie Kingman. He's best known for his criminal defense work, but his passion is complex trials in any case involving accidental injury or wrongful death, which is how our paths crossed in the first place. I'd done some work for Lonnie in the past and, aside from the fact that I'm occasionally in need of his services myself, I figured he'd be good for the referrals. From his point of view, it didn't hurt to have an investigator on the premises. As with California Fidelity, I was not an employee. I worked as an independent contractor, providing professional services and billing accordingly. To celebrate the new arrangement, I went out and bought myself a handsome tweed blazer to wear with my usual jeans and turtleneck. I thought I looked pretty snappy in the outfit.

It was a Monday early in December when I first got involved in the Isabelle Barney murder case. I'd driven down to Cottonwood twice that day, two ten-mile round-trips, trying to serve a subpoena on a witness in a battery case. The first time, he wasn't home. The second time, I caught him just as he pulled into his driveway from work. I handed him the papers, disregarding his annoyance, and took off again with my car radio thundering to mask his parting remarks, which were rude. He used a couple of words I hadn't heard in years. On my way into town, I did a detour past the office.

The Kingman building is a three-story stucco structure, with parking tucked in at ground level and two floors of of-

fices above. Across the facade, there are six pairs of floor-to-ceiling French doors that open inward for ventilation, each flanked by tall wooden shutters painted the soft verdigris of a greening copper roof. A shallow wrought-iron bracket is secured across the lower half of each set of doors. The effect is largely decorative, but in a pinch might prevent a suicidal dog or a client's sulky child from flinging itself out the window in a fit of pique. The building straddles the property and has a driveway that passes through an arch on the right, opening up into a tiny parking lot in the rear. The one drawback is the parsimonious assignment of parking spaces. There are six permanent tenants and twelve parking spots. Since Lonnie owns the building, his law firm had been allotted four: one for John, one for Martin, one for Lonnie, and one for Lonnie's secretary, Ida Ruth. The remaining eight places were parceled out according to the individual leases. The rest of us had a choice of street parking or one of the public lots three blocks away. The local rates are absurdly cheap, given big-city standards, but on my limited budget the tab mounts up. Street parking downtown isn't metered, but it's restricted to ninety minutes and the meter maids are quick to ticket you if you cheat by so much as a minute. As a consequence, I spent a lot of time either moving my car or cruising the area trying to ferret out a spot that was both close by and free. Happily, this exasperating situation only extends until 6:00 P.M.

It was then 6:15 and the third-floor windows along the front were dark, suggesting that everyone had already gone home for the day. When I drove through the arch, I saw Lonnie's car was still in its slot. Ida Ruth's Toyota was gone so I eased my car into her space, next to his Mercedes. An unfamiliar pale blue Jaguar sedan was parked in John's slot. I hung my head out the car window and craned my neck. Lonnie's office lights were on, two oblongs of pale yellow against the slanting shadows from the roof. He was probably with a client.

The days were getting steadily shorter, and a gloom settled over the town at that hour. Something in the air generated a longing for a wood fire, companionship, and the kind of cocktail that looks elegant in the print ads and tastes like liniment. I told myself I had work to do, but in truth it was just a way to postpone going home.

I locked my car and headed for the stairwell, which was tucked into a hollow core that extended up the center of the building like a chimney flue. The stairs were inky, and I had to use my little keychain flashlight to break up the darkness. The third-floor corridor was in shadow, but I could see lights in the reception area through the frosted glass in the front door. By day, the whole third-floor complex was cheerful and well lighted, with white walls, burnt orange carpeting, a forest of greenhouse plants, Scandinavian furniture, and original artwork in bright crayon tones. The office I was renting had served as a combination conference room and kitchen, and was outfitted now with my desk and swivel chair, file cabinets, a small flop-out couch that could double as a bed in an emergency, a telephone, and my answering machine. I was still listed in the yellow pages under Investigators, and people calling the old number were advised of the new. In the weeks since the move, while some business had trickled in, I'd been forced to resort to process serving to make ends meet. At twenty bucks a pop, I was never going to get rich, but on a good day I could sometimes pick up an extra hundred bucks. Not bad, if I could sandwich it in with other investigative work.

I let myself in quietly, not wanting to disturb Lonnie if he was in the middle of a conference. His office door was open and I glanced in automatically as I went past. He was chatting with a client, but when he caught sight of me, he raised his hand and beckoned. "Kinsey, could you spare a minute? There's someone here I want you to meet."

I backtracked to his doorway. Lonnie's client was seated in the black leather wing chair, with his back to me. As Lonnie

stood up, his client stood, too, turning to look at me as we were introduced. His aura was dark, if you buy that kind of talk.

"Kenneth Voigt," Lonnie said. "This is Kinsey Millhone, the private investigator I was telling you about."

We shook hands, going through the usual litany of greetings while we checked each other out. He was in his early fifties with dark hair and dark brown eyes, his brows separated by deep indentations that had been set there by a scowl. His face was blunt, his wide forehead softened by a tongue of thinning hair that was brushed to one side. He smiled politely at me, but his face didn't brighten much. A pale sheen of perspiration seemed to glimmer on his forehead. While he was on his feet, he shed his sport coat and tossed it on the couch. The shirt he wore under it was dark gray, a short-sleeved Polo with a three-button placket open at the neck. Dark hair curled from his shirt collar and a mat of dark hair covered his arms. He was narrow through the shoulders and the muscles in his arms were stringy and undeveloped. He should have worked out at a gym, for his stress levels, if nothing else. He took out a handkerchief, dabbing at his forehead and his upper lip.

"I want her to hear this," Lonnie was saying to Voigt. "She can go through the files tonight and start first thing in the morning."

"Fine with me," Voigt said.

The two sat down again. I folded myself into one corner of the couch and pulled my legs up under me, considerably cheered by the prospects of a paycheck. One advantage in the work for Lonnie is he screens out all the deadbeats.

Lonnie offered me a word of explanation before the conversation continued. "The P.I. we were using just dropped dead of a heart attack. Morley Shine, you know him?"

"Of course," I said, startled. "*Morley* died? When was this?"

"Last night about eight. I was gone over the weekend and

didn't get back till after midnight so I didn't hear about it myself until this morning when Dorothy called me."

Morley Shine had been around ever since I could remember, not a close friend, but certainly a man I could count on if I found myself in a pinch. He and the fellow who'd trained me as a P.I. had been partners for years. At some point, they'd had a falling-out and each had gone into business for himself. Morley was in his late sixties, tall and slump-shouldered, probably eighty pounds overweight, with a round, dimpled face, wheezing laugh, and fingers yellowed from all the cigarettes he smoked. He had access to snitches and informants in every correctional facility in the state, plus contacts in all the relevant local information pools. I'd have to quiz Lonnie later about the circumstances of Morley's death. For the time being, I concentrated on Kenneth Voigt, who had backed up his narrative so he could get a running start.

He stared down at the floor, hands clasped loosely in his lap. "My ex-wife was murdered six years ago. Isabelle Barney. You remember the case?"

The name meant nothing. "I don't think so," I said.

"Someone unscrewed the fisheye in the middle of the front door. He knocked, and when she flipped on the porch light and peered out, he fired a thirty-eight through the spyhole. She died instantly."

My memory kicked in with a jolt. "That was her? I do remember that much. I can't believe it's been six years." I nearly added my only other recollection, that the guy alleged to have killed her was her estranged husband. Apparently not Kenneth Voigt, but who?

I made eye contact with Lonnie, who interjected a comment, picking up on my question as if with ESP. "The guy's name is David Barney. He was acquitted, in case you're curious."

Voigt changed positions in his chair as if the very name made him itch. "The bastard."

Lonnie said, "Go on with your story, Ken. I didn't mean

to interrupt. You might as well give her the background as long as she's here."

It seemed to take a few seconds for him to remember what he'd been saying. "We were married for four years . . . a second marriage for both. We have a ten-year-old daughter named Shelby who's off at boarding school. She was four when Iz was killed. Anyway, Isabelle and I had been having problems . . . nothing unusual as far as I knew. She got involved with Barney. She married him a month after our divorce became final. All he wanted was her money. Everybody knew that except poor, dumb Iz. And I don't mean any insult to her when I say that. I loved the woman, truly, but she was gullible as they come. She was bright and she was talented, but she had no sense of self-worth, which made her a sitting duck for anybody with a kind word. You probably know women like that. Emotionally dependent, no self-esteem to speak of. She was an artist, and while I had tremendous admiration for her ability, it was hard to watch her throw her life away. . . ."

I found myself tuning out his analysis of her character. His generalizations about women were obnoxious and he'd evidently told the same story so often his rendering of events was flat and passionless. The drama was not about her anymore, it was the tale of his reaction. My eye wandered over to the pile of fat manila folders on Lonnie's desk. I could see VOIGT/BARNEY written across the spine. Two cardboard boxes stacked against the wall contained additional files, judging by the labels affixed to one side. Everything Voigt was saying was going to be right there, a compilation of facts without all the editorials attached. It seemed weird to me—what he said might be true, but it wasn't necessarily believable. Some folks are like that. The simplest recollection just sounds false in the rendering. He went on for a bit, speaking in closely knit paragraphs that didn't yield the opportunity for interruption. I wondered how often Lonnie had served as his audience. I noticed he'd disconnected, too. While Kenneth

Voigt's mouth was moving, Lonnie picked up a pencil and began to turn it end over end, tapping on his legal pad first with the point and then with the eraser. I returned my attention to Ken Voigt.

"How'd the guy get off?" I asked as soon as he paused for breath.

Lonnie jumped in, apparently impatient to get down to the meat of the matter. "Dink Jordan prosecuted. What a yawn that was. Jesus. I mean, the man is competent but he's got no style. He thought he could win on the merits of the case." Lonnie snorted at the absurdity of the assumption. "So now we're suing the shit out of David Barney for wrongful death. I hate the guy. Just hate him. The minute he pled not guilty, I told Ken we should jump on the son of a bitch with hobnail boots. I couldn't talk him into it. We filed and got him served, but then Ken insisted we sit on it."

Voigt frowned uncomfortably. "You were right, Lon. I see it now, but you know how it is. My wife, Francesca, was opposed to our reopening the investigation. It's painful for everyone . . . me more than most. I simply couldn't handle it."

Lonnie crossed his eyes. He didn't have a lot of sympathy for what people could or couldn't handle. *His* job was to handle it. Voigt's job was to turn him loose. "Hey, okay. Skip that. It's water under the bridge. It took a year to get him tried and acquitted on the criminal charges. In the meantime, Ken here watches David Barney work his way through Isabelle's money. And believe me, there's plenty of it, most of which would have gone to his daughter, Shelby, if Barney'd been convicted. Finally, the family reaches a point where they can't stand it anymore, so Ken comes back to me and we get into gear. Meanwhile, Barney's attorney, guy named Foss, files a discretionary motion to dismiss for lack of prosecution. I whip into court and tap-dance my tiny heart out. The motion was denied, but the judge made it clear he wasn't happy with me.



“Now, of course, David Barney and this jerk who represents him are using every delay they can think of, and then some. They dicker around and dicker around. We’re going through all the discovery, right? The guy’s been acquitted in criminal court so what difference does it make what he says at this point? But he’s tight-lipped. He’s tense. That’s because he’s guilty as hell. Oh, and here. Check this. Ken here has a guy shows up . . . turns out he shared a cell with David Barney. This guy’s been following the case. He sits in on the trial, just to see what’s going on, and he’s telling us Barney as good as admitted he killed her as he’s walkin’ out the courtroom *door*. The informant’s been hard to nail down, which is why I want to get the sucker served first thing.”

“What good’s it going to do?” I asked. “David Barney can’t be tried again on the murder one.”

“Exactly. Which is why we kicked it over to the civil side. We’ve got a much better shot at him there, which he damn well knows. The guy’s really dragging his feet, doing everything he can to hinder and obstruct. We file a motion. He’s got thirty days to answer so his attorney—what a geek—waits until day twenty-nine and then files a demurrer. Anything to string it out. He’s throwing up roadblocks left and right.

“We bring Barney in for a deposition and he pleads the Fifth. So we take him into court and force him to testify. The judge *orders* the guy to answer because he has no Fifth Amendment rights. There’s no danger of prosecution because jeopardy has attached. Back we go on the depo. So now he takes the Fifth again. We take him in on the contempt, but in the meantime we’re running up against the court statute—”

“Lonnie?” I said.

“We’re humming and humming and it’s not working for us. We’re coming up to the five-year statute and we really need to make the case happen. We’re on the master calendar and we’ve been given priority, and now *Morley* drops dead—”