

'C' is for Corpse

A Kinsey Millhone Mystery



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SUE GRAFTON Author of
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A R I N E H A R T S U S P E N S E N O V E L

“C”^{is}_{for} Corpse

A Kinsey Millhone Mystery

SUE GRAFTON

H E N R Y H O L T A N D C O M P A N Y
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**For the children who chose me:
Leslie, Jay, and Jamie**

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“ C ” I S F O R C O R P S E

A R I N E H A R T S U S P E N S E N O V E L



Epilogue

They told me later, though I remember little of it, that I managed to make my way down to the morgue, where I dialed 911, mumbling a message that brought the cops. What comes back to me most clearly is the hangover I endured after the cocktail of barbiturates I was injected with. I woke in a hospital bed, as sick as a dog. But even with a pounding head, retching into a kidney-shaped plastic basin, I was glad to be among the living.

Glen spoiled me silly and everyone came to see me, including Jonah, Rosie, Gus, and Henry, bearing hot cross buns. Lila, he said, had written to him from a jail up north, but he didn't bother to reply. Glen never relented in her determination to reject both Derek and Kitty, but I introduced Kitty Wenner to Gus. Last I heard, they were dating and Kitty was cleaning up her act. Both had gained weight.

Dr. Fraker is currently out on bail, awaiting trial on charges of attempted murder and two counts of first-degree murder. Nola pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter, but served no time. When I got back to the office, I typed up my report, submitting a bill for thirty-three hours, plus mileage; a total I rounded off to an even \$1000. The balance of Bobby's advance I returned to Varden Talbot's office to be factored into his estate. The rest of the report is a personal letter. Much of my last message to Bobby is devoted to the simple fact that I miss him. I hope, wherever he may be, that he sails among the angels, untethered and at peace.

—Respectfully submitted,
Kinsey Millhone

1

I met Bobby Callahan on Monday of that week. By Thursday, he was dead. He was convinced someone was trying to kill him and it turned out to be true, but none of us figured it out in time to save him. I've never worked for a dead man before and I hope I won't have to do it again. This report is for him, for whatever it's worth.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a licensed private investigator, doing business in Santa Teresa, California, which is ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced. I like being alone and I suspect my independence suits me better than it should. Bobby challenged that. I don't know quite how or why. He was only twenty-three years old. I wasn't romantically involved with him in any sense of the word, but I did care and his death served to remind me, like a custard pie in the face, that life is sometimes one big savage joke. Not funny "ha ha," but cruel, like those gags sixth-graders have been telling since the world began.

It was August and I'd been working out at Santa Teresa Fitness, trying to remedy the residual effects of a broken left arm. The days were hot, filled with relentless sunshine and clear skies. I was feeling cranky and bored, doing push-downs and curls and wrist rolls. I'd just worked two cases back-to-back and I'd sustained more damage than a fractured humerus. I was feeling emotionally battered and I needed a rest. Fortunately, my bank account was fat and I knew I could afford to take two months off. At the same time, the idleness was making me restless and the physical-therapy regimen was driving me nuts.

Santa Teresa Fitness is a real no-nonsense place: the brand X of health clubs. No Jacuzzi, no sauna, no music piped in. Just mirrored walls, body-building equipment, and industrial-grade carpeting the color of asphalt. The whole twenty-eight-hundred square feet of space smells like men's jockstraps.

I'd arrive at eight in the morning, three days a week, and warm up for fifteen minutes, then launch into a series of exercises designed to strengthen and condition my left deltoid, pectoralis major, biceps, triceps, and anything else that had gone awry since I'd had the snot beaten out of me and had intersected the flight path of a .22 slug. The orthopedist had

prescribed six weeks of physical therapy and so far, I'd done three. There was nothing for it but to work my way patiently from one machine to the next. I was usually the only woman in the place at that hour and I tended to distract myself from the pain, sweat, and nausea by checking out men's bodies while they were checking out mine.

Bobby Callahan came in at the same time I did. I wasn't sure what had happened to him, but whatever it was, it had hurt. He was probably just short of six feet tall, with a football player's physique: big head, thick neck, brawny shoulders, heavy legs. Now the shaggy blond head was held to one side, the left half of his face pulled down in a permanent grimace. His mouth leaked saliva as though he'd just been shot up with Novocain and couldn't quite feel his own lips. He tended to hold his left arm up against his waist and he usually carried a folded white handkerchief that he used to mop up his chin. There was a terrible welt of dark red across the bridge of his nose, a second across his chest, and his knees were crisscrossed with scars as though a swordsman had slashed at him. He walked with a lilting gait, his left Achilles tendon apparently shortened, pulling his left heel up. Working out must have cost him everything he had, yet he never failed to appear. There was a doggedness about him that I admired. I watched him with interest, ashamed of my own interior complaints. Clearly, I could recover from my injuries while he could not. I didn't feel sorry for him, but I did feel curious.

That Monday morning was the first time we'd been alone together in the gym. He was doing leg curls, facedown on the bench next to mine, his attention turned inward. I had shifted over to the leg-press machine, just for variety. I weigh 118 and I only have so much upper body I can rehabilitate. I hadn't gotten back into jogging since the injury, so I figured a few leg presses would serve me right. I was only doing 120 pounds, but it hurt anyway. To distract myself, I was playing a little game wherein I tried to determine which apparatus I hated most. The leg-curl machine he was using was a good candidate. I watched him do a set of twelve repetitions and then start all over again.

"I hear you're a private detective," he said without missing a beat. "That true?" There was a slight drag to his voice, but he covered it pretty well.

"Yes. Are you in the market for one?"

"Matter of fact, I am. Somebody tried to kill me."

"Looks like they didn't miss by much. When was this?"

"Nine months ago."

"Why you?"

"Don't know."

The backs of his thighs were bulging, his hamstrings taut as guy wires. Sweat poured off his face. Without even thinking about it, I counted reps with him. Six, seven, eight.

"I hate that machine," I remarked.

He smiled. "Hurts like a son of a bitch, doesn't it?"

"How'd it happen?"

"I was driving up the pass with a buddy of mine late at night. Some car came up and started ramming us from behind. When we got to the bridge just over the crest of the hill, I lost it and we went off. Rick was killed. He bailed out and the car rolled over on him. I should have been killed too. Longest ten seconds of my life, you know?"

"I bet." The bridge he'd soared off spanned a rocky, scrub-choked canyon, four hundred feet deep, a favorite jumping-off spot for suicide attempts. Actually, I'd never heard of anyone surviving that drop. "You're doing great," I said. "You've been working your butt off."

"What else can I do? Just after the accident, they told me I'd never walk. Said I'd never do anything."

"Who said?"

"Family doctor. Some old hack. My mom fired him on the spot and called in an orthopedic specialist. He brought me back. I was out at Rehab for eight months and now I'm doing this. What happened to you?"

"Some asshole shot me in the arm."

Bobby laughed. It was a wonderful snuffling sound. He finished the last rep and propped himself up on his elbows.

He said, "I got four machines to go and then let's bug out. By the way, I'm Bobby Callahan."

"Kinsey Millhone."

He held his hand out and we shook, sealing an unspoken bargain. I knew even then I'd work for him whatever the circumstances.

We ate lunch in a health-food café, one of those places specializing in cunning imitation meat patties that never fool anyone. I don't understand the point myself. It seems to me a vegetarian would be just as repelled by something that *looked* like minced cow parts. Bobby ordered a bean-and-cheese burrito the size of a rolled-up gym towel, smothered in guacamole and sour cream. I opted for stir-fried veggies and brown rice with a glass of white wine of some indeterminate jug sort.

Eating, for Bobby, was the same laborious process as working out, but his single-minded attention to the task allowed me to study him at close range. His hair was sun-bleached and coarse, his eyes brown with the kind of lashes most women have to buy in a box. The left half of his face was inanimate, but he had a strong chin, accentuated by a scar like a rising

moon. My guess was that his teeth had been driven through his lower lip at some point during the punishing descent into that ravine. How he'd lived through it all was anybody's guess.

He glanced up. He knew I'd been staring, but he didn't object.

"You're lucky to be alive," I said.

"I'll tell you the worst of it. Big hunks of my brain are gone, you know?" The drag in his speech was back, as though the very subject affected his voice. "I was in a coma for two weeks, and when I came out, I didn't know what the fuck was going on. I still don't. But I can remember how I used to be and that's what hurts. I was smart, Kinsey. I knew a lot. I could concentrate and I used to have ideas. My mind would make these magic little leaps. You know what I mean?"

I nodded. I knew about minds making magic little leaps.

He went on. "Now I got gaps and spaces. Holes. I've lost big pieces of my past. They don't exist anymore." He paused to dab impatiently at his chin, then shot a bitter glance at the handkerchief. "Jesus, bad enough that I drool. If I'd always been like this, I wouldn't know the difference and it wouldn't bug me so much. I'd assume everybody had a brain that felt like mine. But I was quick once. I know that. I was an A student, on my way to medical school. Now all I do is work out. I'm just trying to regain enough coordination so I can go to the fuckin' toilet by myself. When I'm not in the gym, I see this shrink named Kleinert and try to come to terms with the rest of it."

There were sudden tears in his eyes and he paused, fighting for control. He took a deep breath and shook his head abruptly. When he spoke again, his voice was full of self-loathing.

"So. That's how I spent my summer vacation. How about you?"

"You're convinced it was a murder attempt? Why couldn't it have been some prankster or a drunk?"

He thought for a moment. "I knew the car. At least I think I did. Obviously, I don't anymore, but it seems like . . . at the time, I recognized the vehicle."

"But not the driver?"

He shook his head. "Couldn't tell you now. Maybe I knew then, maybe not."

"Male? Female?" I asked.

"Nuh-un. That's gone, too."

"How do you know Rick wasn't meant to be the victim instead of you?"

He pushed his plate away and signaled for coffee. He was struggling. "I knew something. Something had happened and I figured it out. I remem-

ber that much. I can even remember knowing I was in trouble. I was scared. I just don't remember why."

"What about Rick? Was he part of it?"

"I don't think it had anything to do with him. I couldn't swear to it, but I'm almost positive."

"What about your destination that night? Does that tie in somehow?"

Bobby glanced up. The waitress was standing at his elbow with a coffeepot. He waited until she'd poured coffee for both of us. She departed and he smiled uneasily. "I don't know who my enemies are, you know? I don't know if people around me know this 'thing' I've forgotten about. I don't want anyone to overhear what I say . . . just in case. I know I'm paranoid, but I can't help it."

His gaze followed the waitress as she moved back toward the kitchen. She put the coffeepot back on the unit and picked up an order at the window, glancing back at him. She was young and she seemed to know we were talking about her. Bobby dabbed at his chin again as an afterthought. "We were on our way up to Stage Coach Tavern. There's usually a bluegrass band up there and Rick and I wanted to hear them." He shrugged. "There might have been more to it, but I don't think so."

"What was going on in your life at that point?"

"I'd just graduated from UC Santa Teresa. I had this part-time job at St. Terry's, waiting to hear if I was accepted for med school."

Santa Teresa Hospital had been called St. Terry's ever since I could remember. "Wasn't it late in the year for that? I thought med-school candidates applied during the winter and got replies back by spring."

"Well, actually I *had* applied and didn't get in, so I was trying again."

"What kind of work were you doing at St. Terry's?"

"I was a 'floater,' really. I did all kinds of things. For a while, I worked Admissions, typing up papers before patients came in. I'd call and get preliminary data, insurance coverage, stuff like that. Then for a while, I worked in Medical Records filing charts until I got bored. Last job I had was clerk-typist in Pathology. Worked for Dr. Fraker. He was neat. He let me do lab tests sometimes. You know, just simple stuff."

"It doesn't sound like hazardous work," I said. "What about the university? Could the jeopardy you were in be traced back to the school somehow? Faculty? Studies? Some kind of extracurricular activity you'd been involved in?"

He was shaking his head, apparently drawing a blank. "I don't see how. I'd been out since June. Accident was November."

"But your feeling is that you were the only one who knew this piece of information, whatever it was."

His gaze traveled around the café and then came back to me. "I guess. Me and whoever tried to kill me to shut me up."

I sat and stared at him for a while, trying to get a fix on the situation. I stirred what was probably raw milk into my coffee. Health-food enthusiasts like eating microbes and things like that. "Do you have any sense at all of how long you'd known this thing? Because I'm wondering . . . if it was potentially so dangerous . . . why you didn't spill the beans right away."

He was looking at me with interest. "Like what? To the cops or something like that?"

"Sure. If you stumbled across a theft of some kind, or you found out someone was a Russian spy . . ." I was rattling off possibilities as they occurred to me. "Or you uncovered a plot to assassinate the President . . ."

"Why wouldn't I have picked up the first telephone I came to and called for help?"

"Right."

He was quiet. "Maybe I did that. Maybe . . . shit, Kinsey, I don't know. You don't know how frustrated I get. Early on, those first two, three months in the hospital, all I could think about was the pain. It took everything I had to stay alive. I didn't think about the accident at all. But little by little, as I got better, I started going back to it, trying to remember what happened. Especially when they told me Rick was dead. I didn't find out about that for weeks. I guess they were worried I'd blame myself and it would slow my recovery. I did feel sick about it once I heard. What if I was drunk and just ran us off the road? I had to find out what went on or I knew I'd go crazy on top of everything else. Anyway, that's when I began to piece together this other stuff."

"Maybe the rest of it will come back to you if you've remembered this much."

"But that's just it," he said. "What if it does come back? I figure the only thing keeping me alive right now is the fact that I can't remember any more of it."

His voice had risen and he paused, gaze flicking off to one side. His anxiety was infectious and I felt myself glancing around as he had, wanting to keep my voice low so our conversation couldn't be overheard.

"Have you actually been threatened since this whole thing came up?" I asked.

"No. Un-un."

"No anonymous letters or strange phone calls?"

He was shaking his head. "But I *am* in danger. I know I am. I've been feeling this way for weeks. I need help."

"Have you tried the cops?"

"Sure, I've tried. As far as they're concerned, it was an accident. They have no evidence a crime was committed. Well, hit-and-run. They know somebody rear-ended me and forced me off the bridge, but premeditated murder? Come on. And even if they believed me, they don't have manpower to assign. I'm just an ordinary citizen. I'm not entitled to police protection twenty-four hours a day."

"Maybe you should hire a bodyguard—"

"Screw that! It's you I want."

"Bobby, I'm not saying I won't help you. Of course I will. I'm just talking about your options. It sounds like you need more than me."

He leaned forward, his manner intense. "Just get to the bottom of this. Tell me what's going on. I want to know why somebody's after me and I want them stopped. Then I won't need the cops or a bodyguard or anything else." He clamped his mouth shut, agitated. He rocked back.

"Fuck it," he said. He shifted restlessly and got up. He pulled a twenty out of his wallet and tossed it on the table. He started for the door with that lilting gait, his limp more pronounced than I'd seen it. I grabbed my handbag and caught up with him.

"God, slow down. Let's go back to my office and we'll type up a contract."

He held the door open for me and I went out.

"I hope you can afford my services," I said back over my shoulder.

He smiled faintly. "Don't sweat it."

We turned left, moving toward the parking lot.

"Sorry I lost my temper," he murmured.

"Quit that. I don't give a shit."

"I wasn't sure you'd take me seriously," he said.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"My family thinks I've got a screw loose."

"Yeah, well that's why you hired me instead of them."

"Thanks," he whispered. He tucked his hand through my arm and I glanced over at him. His face was suffused with pink and there were tears in his eyes. He dashed at them carelessly, not looking at me. For the first time, I realized how young he was. God, he was just a kid, banged up, bewildered, scared to death.

We walked back to my car slowly and I was conscious of the stares of the curious, faces averted with pity and uneasiness. It made me want to punch somebody out.

2

By two o'clock that afternoon, the contract was signed, Bobby had given me a two-thousand-dollar advance against fees, and I was dropping him off outside the gym, where he'd left his BMW before lunch. His disability entitled him to the handicapped slot, but I noticed he hadn't used it. Maybe someone else was parked there when he arrived, or maybe, obstinately, he preferred to walk the extra twenty yards.

I leaned across the front seat as he got out. "Who's your attorney?" I asked. He held the door open on the passenger side, his head tilted so he could look in at me.

"Varden Talbot of Talbot and Smith. Why? You want to talk to him?"

"Ask him if he'd have copies of the police reports released to me. It would save me a lot of time."

"O.K. I'll do that."

"Oh, and I should probably start with your immediate family. They might have a theory or two about what's going on. Why don't I give you a call later and find out when people are free?"

Bobby made a face. On the way to my office, he'd told me his disabilities had forced him to move back into the family home temporarily, which didn't sit well with him. His parents had divorced some years ago and his mother had remarried, in fact, this was marriage number three. Apparently, Bobby didn't get along with his current stepfather, but he had a seventeen-year-old stepsister named Kitty whom he seemed to like. I wanted to talk to all three. Most of my investigations start with paperwork, but this one felt different from the outset.

"I have a better idea," Bobby said. "Stop by the house this afternoon. Mom's having some people in for drinks around five. My stepfather's birthday. It'll give you a chance to meet everyone."

I hesitated. "You sure it'll be all right? She might not want me barging in on a special occasion like that."

"It's fine. I'll tell her you're coming. She won't care. Got a pencil? I'll give you directions."

I rooted through my handbag for a pen and my notebook and jotted down the details. "I'll be there about six," I said.

"Great." He slammed the car door and moved off.

I watched him hobble as far as his car and then I headed for home.

I live in what was once a single-car garage, converted now to a two-hundred-dollar-a-month studio apartment maybe fifteen feet square, which serves as living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, closet, and laundry room. All of my possessions are multipurpose and petite. I have a combination refrigerator, sink, and stovette, a doll-sized stacking washer/dryer unit, a sofa that becomes a bed (though I seldom bother to unfold it), and a desk that I sometimes use as a dining-room table. I tend to be work-oriented and my living quarters seem to have shrunk, year by year, to this miniature state. For a while, I lived in a trailer, but that began to feel too opulent. I'm often out of town and I object to spending money for space I don't use. It's possible that one day I'll reduce my personal requirements to a sleeping bag that I can toss in the backseat of my car, thus eliminating altogether the need for paying rent. As it is, my wants are few. I don't have pets or houseplants. I do have friends, but I don't entertain. If I have any hobbies at all, they consist of cleaning my little semi-automatic and reading up on evidential documents. I'm not exactly a bundle of laughs, but I do pay my bills, keep a little money tucked away, and provide myself with medical insurance to cover the hazards of my trade. I like my life just as it is, though I try not to boast overmuch about the fact. About every six or eight months, I run into a man who astounds me sexually, but between escapades, I'm celibate, which I don't think is any big deal. After two unsuccessful marriages, I find myself keeping my guard up, along with my underpants.

My apartment is located on a modest palm-lined street a block from the beach and it's owned by a man named Henry Pitts, who lives in the main house on the property. Henry is eighty-one years old, a retired baker who supplements his income now by turning out breads and pastries that he trades with local merchants for goods and services. He caters tea parties for the little old ladies in the neighborhood, and in his spare time, he writes crossword puzzles that are a bitch to figure out. He's a very handsome man: tall, lean, and tanned, with shocking-white hair that looks as soft as baby fuzz, a thin aristocratic face. His eyes are a violet-blue, the color of ground morning glories, and they radiate intelligence. He's caring, compassionate, and sweet. It shouldn't have surprised me, therefore, to find him in the company of the "babe" who was having mint juleps with him in the garden when I got home.

I had parked my car out front as usual, and I was heading around to the back, where my entrance is located. My apartment faces the rear and looks out onto a picturesque little bit of scenery. Henry has a patch of grass back

there, a weeping willow, rosebushes, two dwarf citrus trees, and a small flagstone patio. He was just coming out of his own back door with a serving tray when he caught sight of me.

"Oh, Kinsey. Well, good. Come on over here. There's someone I want you to meet," he said.

My glance followed his and I saw a woman stretched out on one of the lounge chairs. She must have been in her sixties, plump, with a crown of dyed brown curls. Her face was as lined as soft leather and she used makeup skillfully. It was her eyes that bothered me: a velvety brown, quite large, and, just for a moment, poisonous.

Henry set the tray down on a round metal table between the chairs. "This is Lila Sams," he said, then nodded at me. "My tenant, Kinsey Millhone. Lila's just moved to Santa Teresa. She's renting a room from Mrs. Lowenstein down the street."

She held out a hand with a clatter of red plastic bracelets, moving as though she meant to struggle to her feet.

I crossed the patio. "Don't get up," I said. "Welcome to the neighborhood." I shook hands with her, smiling sociably. Her return smile erased the chill from her gaze and I found myself doing a mental doubletake, wondering if I'd misinterpreted. "What part of the country are you from?"

"Here, there, and everywhere," she said, glancing slyly at Henry. "I wasn't sure how long I'd stay, but Henry makes it seem verry niice."

She wore a low-cut cotton sundress, a bright green-and-yellow geometric print on a white background. Her breasts looked like two five-pound flour sacks from which some of the contents had spilled. Her excess weight was carried in her chest and waist, her hefty hips and thighs tapering to a decent set of calves and quite dainty feet. She wore red canvas wedgies and fat red plastic button earrings. As with a painting, I found my gaze traveling right back around to the place where it began. I wanted to make eye contact again, but she was surveying the tray Henry held out to her.

"Oh my. Well, what's all this? Aren't you a sweetie pie!"

Henry had prepared a plate of canapés. He's one of those people who can whip into the kitchen and create a gourmet snack out of canned goods from the back of the cupboard. All I have at the back of my kitchen cupboard is an old box of cornmeal with bugs.

Lila's red fingernails formed a tiny crane. She lifted a canapé and conveyed it to her mouth. It looked like a toast round with a bite of smoked salmon and a dab of dilled mayonnaise. "Mmm, that's *wonderful*," she said, mouth full, and then licked her fingertips, one by one. She wore several crusty diamond rings, the stones clotted together with rubies, and a square-cut emerald the size of a postage stamp, with diamonds on either