

# T is for Trespass

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## PROLOGUE

I don't want to think about the predators in this world. I know they exist, but I prefer to focus on the best in human nature: compassion, generosity, a willingness to come to the aid of those in need. The sentiment may seem absurd, given our daily ration of news stories detailing thievery, assault, rape, murder, and other treacheries. To the cynics among us, I must sound like an idiot, but I do hold to the good, working wherever possible to separate the wicked from that which profits them. I know there will always be someone poised to take advantage of the vulnerable: the very young, the very old, and the innocent of any age. I know this from long experience.

Solana Rojas was one . . .

# 1

## SOLANA

She had a real name, of course—the one she'd been given at birth and had used for much of her life—but now she had a new name. She was Solana Rojas, whose personhood she'd usurped. Gone was her former self, eradicated in the wake of her new identity. This was as easy as breathing for her. She was the youngest of nine children. Her mother, Marie Terese, had borne her first child, a son, when she was seventeen and a second son when she was nineteen. Both were the product of a relationship never sanctified by marriage, and while the two boys had taken their father's name, they'd never known him. He'd been sent to prison on a drug charge and he'd died there, killed by another inmate in a dispute over a pack of cigarettes.

At the age of twenty-one, Marie Terese had married a man named Panos Agillar. She'd borne him six children in a period of eight years before he left her and ran off with someone else. At the age of thirty, she found herself alone and broke, with eight children

## Sue Grafton

ranging in age from thirteen years to three months. She'd married again, this time to a hardworking, responsible man in his fifties. He fathered Solana—his first child, her mother's last, and their only offspring.

During the years when Solana was growing up, her siblings had laid claim to all the obvious family roles: the athlete, the soldier, the cut-up, the achiever, the drama queen, the hustler, the saint, and the jack-of-all-trades. What fell to her lot was to play the ne'er-do-well. Like her mother, she'd gotten pregnant out of wedlock and had given birth to a son when she was barely eighteen. From that time forward, her progress through life had been hapless. Nothing had ever gone right for her. She lived paycheck to paycheck with nothing set aside and no way to get ahead. Or so her siblings assumed. Her sisters counseled and advised her, lectured and cajoled, and finally threw up their hands, knowing she was never going to change. Her brothers expressed exasperation, but usually came up with money to bail her out of a jam. None of them understood how wily she was.

She was a chameleon. Playing the loser was her disguise. She was not like them, not like anyone else, but it had taken her years to fully appreciate her differences. At first she thought her oddity was a function of the family dynamic, but early in elementary school, the truth dawned on her. The emotional connections that bound others to one another were absent in her. She operated as a creature apart, without empathy. She pretended to be like the little girls and boys in her grade, with their bickering and tears, their tattling, their giggles, and their efforts to excel.

## T is for Trespass

She observed their behavior and imitated them, blending into their world until she seemed much the same. She chimed in on conversations, but only to feign amusement at a joke, or to echo what had already been said. She didn't disagree. She didn't offer an opinion because she had none. She expressed no wishes or wants of her own. She was largely unseen—a mirage or a ghost—watching for little ways to take advantage of them. While her classmates were self-absorbed and oblivious, she was hyperaware. She saw everything and cared for nothing. By the age of ten, she knew it was only a matter of time before she found a use for her talent for camouflage.

By the age of twenty, her disappearing act was so quick and so automatic that she was often unaware she'd absented herself from the room. One second she was there, the next she was gone. She was a perfect companion because she mirrored the person she was with, becoming whatever they were. She was a mime and a mimic. Naturally, people liked and trusted her. She was also the ideal employee—responsible, uncomplaining, tireless, willing to do whatever was asked of her. She came to work early. She stayed late. This made her appear selfless when, in fact, she was utterly indifferent, except when it was a matter of furthering her own aims.

In some ways, the subterfuge had been forced on her. Most of her siblings had managed to put themselves through school, and at this stage in their lives they appeared more successful than she. It made them feel good to help their baby sister, whose prospects were pathetic compared with their own. While she was

## Sue Grafton

happy to accept their largesse, she didn't like being subordinate to them. She'd found a way to make herself their equal, having acquired quite a bit of money that she kept in a secret bank account. It was better they didn't know how much her lot in life had improved. Her next older brother, the one with the law degree, was the only sibling she had any use for. He didn't want to work any harder than she did and he didn't mind bending the rules if the payoff was worthwhile.

She'd borrowed an identity, becoming someone else on two previous occasions. She thought fondly of her other personas, as one would of old friends who'd moved to another state. Like a Method actor, she had a new part to play. She was now Solana Rojas and that's where her focus lay. She kept her new identity wrapped around her like a cloak, feeling safe and protected in the person she'd become.

The original Solana—the one whose life she'd borrowed—was a woman she'd worked with for months in the convalescent wing of a home for seniors. The real Solana, whom she now thought of as “the Other,” was an LVN. She, too, had studied to become a licensed vocational nurse. The only difference between them was that the Other was certified, while she'd had to drop out of school before she'd finished the coursework. That was her father's fault. He'd died and no one had stepped forward to pay for her education. After the funeral, her mother asked her to quit school and get a job, so that was what she'd done. She found work first cleaning houses, and later as a nurse's aide,

## T is for Trespass

pretending to herself that she was a real LVN, which she would have been if she'd finished the program at City College. She knew how to do everything the Other did, but she wasn't as well paid because she lacked the proper credentials. Why was that fair?

She'd chosen the real Solana Rojas the same way she'd chosen the others. There was a twelve-year difference in their ages, the Other being sixty-four years old to her fifty-two. Their features weren't really similar, but they were close enough for the average observer. She and the Other were roughly the same height and weight, though she knew weight was of little consequence. Women gained and lost pounds all the time, so if someone noticed the discrepancy, it was easily explained. Hair color was another insignificant trait. Hair could be any hue or shade found in a drugstore box. She'd gone from a brunette to a blonde to a redhead on previous occasions, all of which were in stark contrast to the natural gray hair she'd had since she was thirty.

Over the past year, she'd darkened her hair little by little until the match with the Other was approximate. Once, a new hire at the convalescent home had mistaken the two for sisters, which had thrilled her no end. The Other was Hispanic, which she herself was not. She could pass if she chose. Her ethnic forebears were Mediterranean; Italians and Greeks with a few Turks thrown in—olive-skinned and dark-haired, with large dark eyes. When she was in the company of Anglos, if she was quiet and went about her business, the assumption was that she didn't speak much English.

## Sue Grafton

This meant many conversations were conducted in her presence as though she couldn't understand a word. In truth, it was Spanish she couldn't speak.

Her preparations for lifting the Other's identity had taken an abrupt turn on Tuesday of the week before. On Monday, the Other told the nursing staff she'd given two weeks' notice. Soon her classes were starting and she wanted a break before she devoted herself to school full-time. This was the signal that it was time to put her plan into operation. She needed to lift the Other's wallet because a driver's license was crucial to her scheme. Almost as soon as she thought of it, the opportunity arose. That's what life was like for her, one possibility after another presenting itself for her personal edification and advancement. She hadn't been given many advantages in life and those she had, she'd been forced to create for herself.

She was in the staff lounge when the Other returned from a doctor's appointment. She'd been ill some time before, and while her disease was in remission, she'd had frequent checkups. She told everyone her cancer was a blessing. She was more appreciative of life. Her illness had motivated her to reorder her priorities. She'd been accepted to graduate school, where she would study for an MBA in health care management.

The Other hung her handbag in her locker and draped her sweater over it. There was only the one hook, as a second hook had a screw missing and dangled uselessly. The Other closed her locker and snapped shut the combination lock without turning the dial. She did this so it would be quicker and easier to pop the lock open at the end of the day.



## T is for Trespass

She'd waited, and when the Other had gone out to the nurse's station, she'd pulled on a pair of disposable latex gloves and given the lock a tug. It hadn't taken any time at all to open the locker, reach into the Other's bag, and remove her wallet. She'd slipped the Other's driver's license from its windowed compartment and put the wallet back, reversing herself as neatly as a strip of film. She peeled off the gloves and tucked them into the pocket of her uniform. The license she placed under the Dr. Scholl's pad in the sole of her right shoe. Not that anyone would suspect. When the Other noticed her license was gone, she'd assume she'd left it somewhere. It was always this way. People blamed themselves for being careless and absent-minded. It seldom occurred to them to accuse anyone else. In this case, no one would think to point a finger at her, because she made such a point of being scrupulous in the company of others.

To execute the remaining aspect of the plan, she'd waited until the Other's shift was over and the administrative staff were gone for the day. All the front offices were empty. As was usual on Tuesday nights, the office doors were left unlocked so a cleaning crew could come in. While they were hard at work, it was easy to enter and find the keys to the locked file cabinets. The keys were kept in the secretary's desk and needed only to be plucked up and put to use. No one questioned her presence, and she doubted anyone would remember later that she'd come and gone. The cleaning crew was supplied by an outside agency. Their job was to vacuum, dust, and empty the trash. What did they know about the inner workings of the

## Sue Grafton

convalescent wing in a senior citizens' home? As far as they were concerned—given her uniform—she was a bona fide RN, a person of status and respect, entitled to do as she pleased.

She removed the application the Other had filled out when she applied for the job. This two-page form contained all the data she would need to assume her new life: date of birth, place of birth, which was Santa Teresa, Social Security number, education, the number of her nursing license, and her prior employment. She made a photocopy of the document along with the two letters of recommendation attached to the Other's file. She made copies of the Other's job evaluations and her salary reviews, feeling a flash of fury when she saw the humiliating gap between what the two of them were paid. No sense fuming about that now. She returned the paperwork to the folder and replaced the file in the drawer, which she then locked. She put the keys in the secretary's desk drawer again and left the office.

# 2

**DECEMBER 1987**

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator in the small Southern California town of Santa Teresa, ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles. We were nearing the end of 1987, a year in which the Santa Teresa Police Department crime analyst logged 5 homicides, 10 bank robberies, 98 residential burglaries, 309 arrests for motor vehicle theft and 514 for shoplifting, all of this in a population of approximately 85,102, excluding Colgate on the north side of town and Montebello to the south.

It was winter in California, which meant the dark began its descent at five o'clock in the afternoon. By then, house lights were popping on all over town. Gas fireplaces had been switched on and jet blue flames were curling up around the stacks of fake logs. Somewhere in town, you might've caught the faint scent of real wood burning. Santa Teresa doesn't have many deciduous trees, so we aren't subjected to the sorry sight of bare branches against the gray December skies.

## Sue Grafton

Lawns, leaves, and shrubberies were still green. Days were gloomy, but there were splashes of color in the landscape—the salmon and magenta bougainvillea that flourished through December and into February. The Pacific Ocean was frigid—a dark, restless gray—and the beaches fronting it were deserted. The daytime temperatures had dropped into the fifties. We all wore heavy sweaters and complained about the cold.

For me, business had been slow despite the number of felonies in play. Something about the season seemed to discourage white-collar criminals. Embezzlers were probably busy Christmas shopping with the money they'd liberated from their respective company tills. Bank and mortgage frauds were down, and the telemarketing scamsters were listless and uninterested. Even divorcing spouses didn't seem to be in a battling mood, sensing perhaps that hostilities could just as easily carry over into spring. I continued to do the usual paper searches at the hall of records, but I wasn't being called upon to do much else. However, since lawsuits are always a popular form of indoor sport, I was kept busy working as a process server, for which I was registered and bonded in Santa Teresa County. The job put a lot of miles on my car, but the work wasn't taxing and netted me sufficient money to pay my bills. The lull wouldn't last long, but there was no way I could have seen what was coming.

At 8:30 that Monday morning, December 7, I picked up my shoulder bag, my blazer, and my car keys, and headed out the door on my way to work. I'd been skipping my habitual three-mile jog, unwilling to stir myself to exercise in the predawn dark. Given the

## T is for Trespass

coziness of my bed, I didn't even feel guilty. As I passed through the gate, the comforting squeak of the hinges was undercut by a brief wail. At first I thought *cat, dog, baby, TV*. None of the possibilities quite captured the cry. I paused, listening, but all I heard were ordinary traffic noises. I moved on and I'd just reached my car when I heard the wailing again. I reversed my steps, pushed through the gate, and headed for the backyard. I'd just rounded the corner when my landlord appeared. Henry's eighty-seven years old and owns the house to which my studio apartment is attached. His consternation was clear. "What was *that*?"

"Beats me. I heard it just now as I was going out the gate."

We stood there, our ears attuned to the usual sounds of morning in the neighborhood. For one full minute, there was nothing, and then it started up again. I tilted my head like a pup, pricking my ears as I tried to pinpoint the origin, which I knew was close by.

"Gus?" I asked.

"Possibly. Hang on a sec. I have a key to his place."

While Henry returned to the kitchen in search of the key, I covered the few steps between his property and the house next door, where Gus Vronsky lived. Like Henry, Gus was in his late eighties, but where Henry was sharp, Gus was abrasive. He enjoyed a well-earned reputation as the neighborhood crank, the kind of guy who called the police if he thought your TV was too loud or your grass was too long. He called Animal Control to report barking dogs, stray dogs, and dogs that went doo-doo in his yard. He called the City to make sure permits had been issued for minor construction

## Sue Grafton

projects: fences, patios, replacement windows, roof repairs. He suspected most things you did were illegal and he was there to set you straight. I'm not sure he cared about the rules and regulations as much as he liked kicking up a fuss. And if, in the process, he could set you against your neighbor, all the better for him. His enthusiasm for causing trouble was probably what had kept him alive for so long. I'd never had a run-in with him myself, but I'd heard plenty. Henry tolerated the man even though he'd been subjected to annoying phone calls on more than one occasion.

In the seven years I'd lived next door to Gus, I'd watched age bend him almost to the breaking point. He'd been tall once upon a time, but now he was round-shouldered and sunken-chested, his back forming a C as though an unseen chain bound his neck to a ball that he dragged between his legs. All this flashed through my mind in the time it took Henry to return with a set of house keys in hand.

Together we crossed Gus's lawn and climbed the steps to his porch. Henry rapped on the glass pane in the front door. "Gus? Are you okay?"

This time the moaning was distinct. Henry unlocked the door and we went into the house. The last time I'd seen Gus, probably three weeks before, he was standing in his yard, berating two nine-year-old boys for practicing their ollies in the street outside his house. True, the skateboards were noisy, but I thought their patience and dexterity were remarkable. I also thought their energies were better spent mastering kick-flips than soaping windows or knocking over trash cans,

## T is for Trespass

which is how boys had entertained themselves in my day.

I caught sight of Gus a half second after Henry did. The old man had fallen. He lay on his right side, his face a pasty white. He'd dislocated his shoulder, and the ball of his humerus bulged from the socket. Beneath his sleeveless undershirt, his clavicle protruded like a budding wing. Gus's arms were spindly and his skin was so close to translucent I could see the veins branching up along his shoulder blades. Dark blue bruises suggested ligament or tendon damage that would doubtless take a long time to mend.

I felt a hot rush of pain as though the injury were mine. On three occasions, I've shot someone dead, but that was purely self-defense and had nothing to do with my squeamishness about the stub ends of bones and other visible forms of suffering. Henry knelt beside Gus and tried to help him to his feet, but his cry was so sharp, he abandoned the idea. I noticed that one of Gus's hearing aids had come loose and was lying on the floor just out of his reach.

I spotted an old-fashioned black rotary phone on a table at one end of the couch. I dialed 9-1-1 and sat down, hoping the sudden white ringing in my head would subside. When the dispatcher picked up, I detailed the problem and asked for an ambulance. I gave her the address and as soon as I hung up, I crossed the room to Henry's side. "She's saying seven to ten minutes. Is there anything we can do for him in the meantime?"

"See if you can find a blanket so we can keep him

## Sue Grafton

warm.” Henry studied my face. “How are you doing? You don’t look so good yourself.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be right back.”

The layout of Gus’s house was a duplicate of Henry’s, so it didn’t take me long to find the bedroom. The place was a mess—bed unmade, clothes strewn everywhere. An antique chest of drawers and a tall-boy were cluttered with junk. The room smelled of mildew and bulging trash bags. I loosened the bedspread from a knot of sheets and returned to the living room.

Henry covered Gus with care, trying not to disturb his injuries. “When did you fall?”

Gus flicked a pain-filled look at Henry. His eyes were blue, the lower lids as droopy as a bloodhound’s. “Last night. I fell asleep on the couch. Midnight, I got up to turn off the television and took a tumble. I don’t remember what caused me to fall. One second I was up, the next I was down.” His voice was raspy and weak. While Henry talked to him, I went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water from the tap. I made a point of blanking out my view of the room, which was worse than the other rooms I’d seen. How could someone live in such filth? I did a quick search through the kitchen drawers, but there wasn’t a clean towel or dishrag to be found. Before I returned to the living room, I opened the back door and left it ajar, hoping the fresh air would dispel the sour smell that hung over everything. I handed the water glass to Henry and watched while he pulled a fresh handkerchief from his pocket. He saturated the linen with water and dabbed it on Gus’s dry lips.



## T is for Trespass

Three minutes later, I heard the high-wailing siren of the ambulance turning onto our street. I went to the door and watched as the driver double-parked and got out with the two additional paramedics who had ridden in the back. A bright red Fire Rescue vehicle pulled up behind, spilling EMT personnel as well. The flashing red lights were oddly syncopated, a stuttering of red. I held the door open, admitting three young men and two women in blue shirts with patches on their sleeves. The first guy carried their gear, probably ten to fifteen pounds' worth, including an EKG monitor, defibrillator, and pulse oximeter. One of the women toted an ALS jump bag, which I knew contained drugs and an intubation set.

I took a moment to close and lock the back door, and then waited on the front porch while the paramedics went about their business. This was a job where they spent much of their time on their knees. Through the open door I could hear the comforting murmur of questions and Gus's tremulous replies. I didn't want to be present when the time came to move him. One more of his yelps and they'd be tending to me.

Henry joined me a moment later and the two of us retreated to the street. Neighbors were scattered along the sidewalk, attentive in the wake of this undefined emergency. Henry chatted with Moza Lowenstein, who lived two houses down. Since Gus's injuries weren't life-threatening, we could talk among ourselves without any sense of disrespect. It took an additional fifteen minutes before Gus was loaded into the back of the ambulance. By then, he was on an IV line.

Henry consulted with the driver, a hefty dark-haired

## Sue Grafton

man in his thirties, who told us they were taking Gus to the emergency room at Santa Teresa Hospital, referred to fondly by most of us as “St. Terry’s.”

Henry said he’d follow in his car. “Are you coming?”

“I can’t. I have to go on to work. Will you call me later?”

“Of course. I’ll give you a buzz as soon as I know what’s going on.”

I waited until the ambulance departed and Henry had backed out of his drive before I got in my car.

On the way into town, I stopped off at an attorney’s office and picked up an Order to Show Cause notifying a noncustodial spouse that a modification of child support was being sought. The ex-husband was a Robert Vest, whom I was already fondly thinking of as “Bob.” Our Bob was a freelance tax consultant working from his home in Colgate. I checked my watch, and since it was only a few minutes after ten, I headed to his place in hopes of catching him at his desk.

I found his house and passed at a slightly slower speed than normal, then circled back and parked on the opposite side of the street. Both the driveway and the carport were empty. I put the papers in my bag, crossed, and climbed his front steps to the porch. The morning newspaper lay on the mat, suggesting that Bobby wasn’t yet up. Might have had a late night. I knocked and waited. Two minutes passed. I knocked again, more emphatically. Still no response. I edged to my right and took a quick peep in the window. I could

## **T is for Trespass**

see past his dining room table and into the darkened kitchen beyond. The place had that glum air of emptiness. I returned to my car, made a note of the date and time of the attempt, and went on to the office.