lovereading.co.uk

R is for Ricochet

Sue Grafton

Published by Pan Macmillan

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

1

The basic question is this: given human nature, are any of us really capable of change? The mistakes other people make are usually patently obvious. Our own are tougher to recognize. In most cases, our path through life reflects a fundamental truth about who we are now and who we've been since birth. We're optimists or pessimists, joyful or depressed, gullible or cynical, inclined to seek adventure or to avoid all risks. Therapy might strengthen our assets or offset our liabilities, but in the main we do what we do because we've always done it that way, even when the outcome is bad . . . perhaps *especially* when the outcome is bad.

This is a story about romance—love gone right, love gone wrong, and matters somewhere in between.

I left downtown Santa Teresa that day at 1:15 and headed for Montebello, a short ten miles south. The weather report had promised highs in the seventies. Morning cloudiness had given way to sunshine, a welcomed respite from the overcast that typically mars our June and

July. I'd eaten lunch at my desk, feasting on an olive-and-pimiento-cheese sandwich on wheat bread, cut in quarters, my third-favorite sandwich in the whole wide world. So what was the problem? I had none. Life was great.

In committing the matter to paper, I can see now what should have been apparent from the first, but events seemed to unfold at such a routine pace that I was caught, metaphorically speaking, asleep at the wheel. I'm a private detective, female, age thirty-seven, working in the small Southern California town of Santa Teresa. My jobs are varied, not always lucrative, but sufficient to keep me housed and fed and ahead of my bills. I do employee background checks. I track down missing persons or locate heirs entitled to monies in the settlement of an estate. On occasion, I investigate claims involving arson, fraud, or wrongful death.

In my personal life, I've been married and divorced twice, and subsequent relationships have usually come to grief. The older I get, the less I seem to understand men, and because of that I tend to shy away from them. Granted, I have no sex life to speak of, but at least I'm not plagued by unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. I've learned the hard way that love and work are a questionable mix.

I was driving on a stretch of highway once known as the Montebello Parkway, built in 1927 as the result of a fund-raising campaign that made possible the creation of frontage roads and landscaped center dividers still in evidence today. Because billboards and commercial structures along the roadway were banned at the same time, that section of the 101 is still attractive, except when it's jammed with rush-hour traffic.

Montebello itself underwent a similar transformation in

1948, when the Montebello Protective and Improvement Association successfully petitioned to eliminate sidewalks, concrete curbs, advertising signs, and anything else that might disrupt the rural atmosphere. Montebello is known for its two-hundred-some-odd luxury estates, many of them built by men who'd amassed their fortunes selling common household goods, salt and flour being two.

I was on my way to meet Nord Lafferty, an elderly gentleman, whose photograph appeared at intervals in the society column of the *Santa Teresa Dispatch.* This was usually occasioned by his making yet another sizable contribution to some charitable foundation. Two buildings at UCST had been named for him, as had a wing of Santa Teresa Hospital and a special collection of rare books he'd donated to the public library. He'd called me two days before and indicated he had "a modest undertaking" he wanted to discuss. I was curious how he'd come by my name and even more curious about the job itself. I've been a private investigator in Santa Teresa for the past ten years, but my office is small and, as a rule, I'm ignored by the wealthy, who seem to prefer doing business through their attorneys in New York, Chicago, or L.A.

I took the St. Isadore off-ramp and turned north toward the foothills that ran between Montebello and the Los Padres National Forest. At one time, this area boasted grand old resort hotels, citrus and avocado ranches, olive groves, a country store, and the Montebello train depot, which serviced the Southern Pacific Railroad. I'm forever reading up on local history, trying to imagine the region as it was 125 years ago. Land was selling then for seventy-five cents an acre. Montebello is still bucolic, but much of the charm has been bulldozed away. What's been erected

instead—the condominiums, housing developments, and the big flashy starter castles of the nouveau riche—is poor compensation for what was lost or destroyed.

I turned right on West Glen and drove along the winding two-lane road as far as Bella Sera Place. Bella Sera is lined with olive and pepper trees, the narrow blacktop climbing gradually to a mesa that affords a sweeping view of the coast. The pungent scent of the ocean faded with my ascent, replaced by the smell of sage and the bay laurel trees. The hillsides were thick with yarrow, wild mustard, and California poppies. The afternoon sun had baked the boulders to a golden tum, and a warm chuffing wind was beginning to stir the dry grasses. The road wound upward through an alley of live oaks that terminated at the entrance to the Lafferty estate. The property was surrounded by a stone wall that was eight feet high and posted with No Trespassing signs.

I slowed to an idle when I reached the wide iron gates. I leaned out and pushed the call button on a mounted keypad. Belatedly I spotted a camera mounted atop one of two stone pillars, its hollow eye fixed on me. I must have passed inspection because the gates swung open at a measured pace. I shifted gears and sailed through, following the brick-paved drive for another quarter of a mile.

Through a picket fence of pines, I caught glimpses of a gray stone house. When the whole of the residence finally swept into view, I let out a breath. Something of the past remained after all. Four towering eucalyptus trees laid a dappled shade on the grass, and a breeze pushed a series of cloud-shaped shadows across the red tile roof. The two-story house, with matching one-story wings topped with

stone balustrades at each end, dominated my visual field. A series of four arches shielded the entrance and provided a covered porch on which wicker furniture had been arranged. I counted twelve windows on the second floor, separated by paired eave brackets, largely decorative, that appeared to support the roof.

I pulled onto a parking pad sufficient to accommodate ten cars and left my pale blue VW hunched, cartoonlike, between a sleek Lincoln Continental on one side and a full-size Mercedes on the other. I didn't bother to lock up, operating on the assumption that the electronic surveillance system was watching over both me and my vehicle as I crossed to the front walk.

The lawns were wide and well tended, and the quiet was underlined by the twittering of finches. I pressed the front bell, listening to the hollow-sounding chimes inside clanging out two notes as though by a hammer on iron. The ancient woman who came to the door wore an old-fashioned black uniform with a white pinafore over it. Her opaque stockings were the color of doll flesh, her crepe-soled shoes emitting the faintest squeak as I followed her down the marble-tiled hall. She hadn't asked my name, but perhaps I was the only visitor expected that day. The corridor was paneled in oak, the white plaster ceiling embossed with chevrons and fleurs-de-lis.

She showed me into the library, which was also paneled in oak. Drab leather-bound books lined shelves that ran floor to ceiling, with a brass rail and a rolling ladder allowing access to the upper reaches. The room smelled of dry wood and paper mold. The inner hearth in the stone fireplace was tall enough to stand in, and a recent blaze

had left a partially blackened oak log and the faint stench of wood smoke. Mr. Lafferty was seated in one of a pair of matching wing chairs.

I placed him in his eighties, an age I'd considered elderly once upon a time. I've since come to realize how widely the aging process varies. My landlord is eighty-seven, the baby of his family, with siblings whose ages range as high as ninety-six. All five of them are lively, intelligent, adventurous, competitive, and given to good-natured squabbling among themselves. Mr. Lafferty, on the other hand, looked as though he'd been old for a good twenty years. He was inordinately thin, with knees as bony as a pair of misplaced elbows. His once sharp features had at least been softened by the passing years. Two small clear plastic tubes had been placed discreetly in his nostrils, tethering him to a stout green oxygen tank on a cart to his left. One side of his jaw was sunken, and a savage red line running across his throat suggested extensive surgery of some vicious sort.

He studied me with eyes as dark and shiny as dots of brown sealing wax. "I appreciate your coming, Ms. Millhone. I'm Nord Lafferty," he said, holding out a hand that was knotted with veins. His voice was hoarse, barely a whisper.

"Nice to meet you," I murmured, moving forward to shake hands with him. His were pale, a tremor visible in his fingers, which were icy to the touch.

He motioned to me. "You might want to pull that chair close. I've had thyroid surgery a month ago and more recently some polyps removed from my vocal cords. I've been left with this rasping noise that passes as speech.

Isn't painful, but it's irksome. I apologize if I'm difficult to understand."

"So far, I'm not having any problem."

"Good. Would you like a cup of tea? I can have my housekeeper make a pot, but I'm afraid you'll have to pour for yourself. These days, her hands aren't any steadier than mine."

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I pulled the second wing chair closer and took a seat. "When was this house built? It's really beautiful."

"1893. A man named Mueller bought a six-hundred-forty-acre section from the county of Santa Teresa. Of that, seventy acres remain. House took six years to build and the story has it Mueller died the day the workers finally set down their tools. Since then, the occupants have fared poorly . . . except for me, knock on wood. I bought the property in 1929, just after the crash. Fellow who owned the place lost everything. Drove into town, climbed up to the clock tower, and dived over the rail. Widow needed the cash and I stepped in. I was criticized, of course. Folks claimed I took advantage, but I'd loved the house from the minute I laid eyes on it. Someone would have bought it. Better me than them. I had money for the upkeep, which wasn't true of many folks back then."

"You were lucky."

"Indeed. Made my fortune in paper goods in case you're curious and too polite to inquire."

I smiled. "Polite, I don't know about. I'm always curious."

"That's fortunate, I'd say, given the business you're in. I'm assuming you're a busy woman so I'll get right to the

point. Your name was given to me by a friend of yours—fellow I met during this recent hospital stay."

"Stacey Oliphant," I said, the name flashing immediately to mind. I'd worked a case with Stacey, a retired Sheriff's Department homicide detective, and my old pal Lieutenant Dolan, now retired from the Santa Teresa Police Department. Stacey was battling cancer, but the last I'd heard, he'd been given a reprieve.

Mr. Lafferty nodded. "He asked me to tell you he's doing well, by the way. He checked in for a battery of tests, but all of them turned out negative. As it happened, the two of us walked the halls together in the afternoons, and I got chatting about my daughter, Reba."

I was already thinking skip trace, missing heir, possibly a background check on a guy if Reba were romantically involved.

He went on. "I only have the one child and I suppose I've spoiled her unmercifully, though that wasn't my intent. Her mother ran off when she was just a little thing, this high. I was caught up in business and left the day-to-day raising of her to a series of nannies. If she'd been a boy I could have sent her off to boarding school the way my parents did me, but I wanted her at home. In retrospect, I see that might've been poor judgment on my part, but it didn't seem so at the time." He paused and then gestured impatiently toward the floor, as though chiding a dog for leaping up on him. "No matter. It's too late for regrets. Pointless, anyway. What's done is done." He looked at me sharply from under his bony brow. "You probably wonder what I'm driving at."

I proffered a slight shrug, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Reba's being paroled on July twentieth. That's next Monday morning. I need someone to pick her up and bring her home. She'll be staying with me until she's on her feet again."

"What facility?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound as startled as I felt.

"California Institution for Women. Are you familiar with the place?"

"It's down in Corona, couple of hundred miles south. I've never actually been there, but I know where it is."

"Good. I'm hoping you can take time out of your schedule for the trip."

"That sounds easy enough, but why me? I charge five hundred dollars a day. You don't need a private detective to make a run like that. Doesn't she have friends?"

"Not anyone I'd ask. Don't worry about the money. That's the least of it. My daughter's difficult. Willful and rebellious. I want you to see to it she keeps the appointment with her parole officer and whatever else is required once she's been released. I'll pay you your full rate even if you only work for a part of each day."

"What if she doesn't like the supervision?"

"It's not up to her. I've told her I'm hiring someone to assist her and she's agreed. If she likes you, she'll be cooperative, at least to a point."

"May I ask what she did?"

"Given the time you'll be spending in her company, you're entitled to know. She was convicted of embezzling money from the company she worked for. Alan Beckwith and Associates. He does property management, real estate investment and development, things of that type. Do you know the man?"

"I've seen his name in the paper."

Nord Lafferty shook his head. "I don't care for him myself. I've known his wife's family for years. Tracy's a lovely girl. I can't understand how she ended up with the likes of him. Alan Beckwith is an upstart. He calls himself an entrepreneur, but I've never been entirely clear what he does. Our paths have crossed in public on numerous occasions and I can't say I'm impressed. Reba seems to think the world of him. I will credit him for this—he spoke up in her behalf before her sentencing. It was a generous gesture on his part and one he didn't have to make."

"How long has she been at CIW?"

"She's served twenty-two months of a four-year sentence. She never went to trial. At her arraignment—which I'm sorry to say I missed—she claimed she was indigent, so the court appointed a public defender to handle her case. After consultation with him, she waived her right to a preliminary hearing and entered a plea of guilty."

"Just like that?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And her attorney agreed to it?"

"He argued strenuously against it, but Reba wouldn't listen."

"How much money are we talking?"

"Three hundred fifty thousand dollars over a two-year period."

"How'd they discover the theft?"

"During a routine audit. Reba was one of a handful of employees with access to the accounts. Naturally, suspicion fell on her. She's been in trouble before, but nothing of this magnitude."

I could feel a protest welling but I bit back my response.

He leaned forward. "You have something to say, feel free to say it. Stacey tells me you're outspoken so please don't hesitate on my account. It may save us a misunderstanding."

"I was just wondering why you didn't step in. A high-powered attorney might have made all the difference."

He dropped his gaze to his hands. "I should have helped her . . . I know that . . . but I'd been coming to her rescue for many, many years . . . all her life, if you want to know the truth. At least that's what I was being told by friends. They said she had to face the consequences of her behavior or she was never going to learn. They said I'd be enabling, that saving her was the worst possible action under the circumstances."

"Who's this 'they' you're referring to?"

For the first time, he faltered. "I had a lady friend. Lucinda. We'd been keeping company for years. She'd seen me intercede on Reba's behalf on countless occasions. She persuaded me to put my foot down and that's what I did."

"And now?"

"Frankly, I was shocked when Reba was sentenced to four years in state prison. I had no idea the penalty would be so stiff. I thought the judge would suspend sentence or agree to probation, as the public defender suggested. At any rate, Lucinda and I quarreled, bitterly I might add. I broke off the relationship and severed my ties with her. She was much younger than I. In hindsight, I realized she was angling for herself, hoping for marriage. Reba disliked her intensely. Lucinda knew that, of course."

"What happened to the money?"

"Reba gambled it away. She's always been attracted to

card play. Roulette, the slots. She loves to bet the ponies, but she has no head for it."

"She's a problem gambler?"

"Her problem isn't the gambling, it's the losing," he remarked, with only the weakest of smiles.

"What about drugs and alcohol?"

"I'd have to answer yes on both counts. She tends to be reckless. She has a wild streak like her mother. I'm hoping this experience in prison has taught her self-restraint. As for the job itself, we'll play that by ear. We're talking two to three days, a week at the most, until she's reestablished herself. Since your responsibilities are limited, I won't be requiring a written report. Submit an invoice and I'll pay your daily rate and all the necessary expenses."

"That seems simple enough."

"One other item. If there's any suggestion that she's backsliding, I want to be informed. Perhaps with sufficient warning, I can head off disaster this time around."

"A tall order."

"I'm aware of that."

Briefly, I considered the proposition. Ordinarily I don't like serving as a babysitter and potential tattletale, but in this case, his concern didn't seem out of line. "What time will she be released?"