

GRACKLE

Confidentially, "grackle" is one of my favorite words. But I digress. The mystery I need you to help me unravel is, what has happened to Grace Dale?

I learned of Grace's existence when I went to Ace Investigations to try out my latest undercover disguise on Vic. Victor Van Mutter, a retired Tucson Police detective, is helping me get a Professional Investigator's license by assigning me surveillance jobs for his detective agency.

The disguise I'd dreamed up on this particular day was a drastic change from my usual MO; it didn't involve any of my wigs or makeup. Instead, I came simply as *me*— grey roots showing in my otherwise golden blonde hair; barely visible eyebrows and eyelashes; no rouge or lipstick. Squeezed into a forty-year-old dress I keep for sentimental reasons, I looked, in short, like something that might frighten little children.

Parking my vintage Lagonda sports coupe a block away from Ace Investigations, I pulled my hair across half my face and mussed it up as though I didn't own a comb. To complete the disguise I should have smelled as bad as I looked, but I couldn't handle going weeks without a shower.

Hobbling up to the receptionist on a cane, I asked in a croaky voice if I could please have a glass of water.

"Sure thing." Carla looked up with her usual perky smile. "Oh, hi, Millie. I have a letter for you." She reached for an envelope, then hesitated with an apologetic frown. "Oh dear, I recognized you again, didn't I? I keep forgetting to pretend I didn't. Well, I bet you'll fool Vic this time, so don't mind me."

Crushed though I was, I forced a smile. The envelope was addressed to "Mrs. Mildred Mildew, c/o Ace Investigations, 497 W. Los Arcos Way, Tucson, AZ 85713." No return address. It contained a card, the kind animal rescue groups

send in the mail, depicting a killer whale. It wasn't my birthday, so it seemed odd to send a card instead of phoning or emailing. My intuition (which works better than my logic) told me the sender was deceptive by nature, and that I should be wary of being lied to. This was confirmed by her extremely close-spaced handwriting. I held the card by the edge in case it contained valuable fingerprints.

Dear Mrs. Mildew,

I read about some of your cases in Molly McKinney's book, In Plain Sight, and was impressed by your intriguing adventures. I thought that if I ever needed a good detective, you would be the first one I'd contact.

Well, I finally have a reason to contact you, although ironically, wish I didn't. I believe I am being stalked. I have an idea who it might be, but not enough evidence. This Monday at 2:00 p.m. I will be in Del Rio Park, corner of Greasewood and Ironwood Hill. Please meet me there if at all possible.

Yours hopefully, Grace Dale

The Monday in question was today. Normally I didn't meet clients unless my makeup was flawless, but there was no time to go home and change. A stickler for being on time, I told Carla where I was going and why, and took off in the Lagonda.

Reaching the park, I was shocked that even more of the scenic area had been usurped by apartments. Damning the greedy developers with a dire curse from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, I made my way to the one remaining picnic shelter. It was an unseasonably warm November day in Tucson, eighty degrees in the sun and not a cloud in the sky, but the heat meant a storm was on the way. I stood in the shade of a giant saguaro cactus to wait for Grace.

When the sun got too warm I moved to the picnic table and started to play solitaire on my mini iPad. I hoped nothing bad had happened to Grace, but after

half an hour my simmering annoyance came to a boil and I got back in the car to leave.

I found my exit blocked by a silver Mercedes sedan that stopped in the middle of the road. Out stepped a fiftyish woman who looked nothing like the slender, dark-haired Grace I had pictured. This woman was apple shaped with straggly blonde hair and a wrinkled muumuu.

She approached me with a broad smile. "Mrs. Mildew? I'm Grace Dale," she said, extending a pudgy, limp hand. "Sorry I'm late—I got lost." The way she avoided my eyes made me suspect otherwise. Squeezing onto the concrete bench, she rested her forearms on the table and interlaced her fingers.

I sat down opposite her. "So you've read *In Plain Sight*, have you? I'm flattered. What did you like about the book?"

"You love animals and hate abusers, like I do."

"Yes, I do feel strongly about it. So, how can I help you, Grace? Your letter said you thought you were being stalked."

"That's right. It's driving me crazy. I hope you can help me find this freak and get her arrested."

"You said 'her'? Who do you think is stalking you?"

She looked down at her hands. "I don't want to falsely accuse anyone, but it might be my housemate, Sue Mote. I think she's getting dementia or something."

I leaned forward. "How long have you known her?"

"Ten years. We've lived together since we met at grief counseling. Both of our husbands died the same week."

"That's amazing. You must be good friends to have lived together this long."

A faint smile crossed her neon-red lips. "Bob left me with a big house and plenty of money, and Sue was just scraping by, out of a job, so you might say it

was a friendship made in heaven. I provided the money; she provided the companionship."

I wondered why she spoke in the past tense. "Are you still living together?"

"We were. Normally she works from home. I'm a docent at the Desert Museum. Two weeks ago we had a little argument, and she took a suitcase and left. I have no idea where she is now."

A bee buzzed around my head and I brushed it aside. I hoped it wasn't one of those aggressive Africanized ones that have invaded Arizona like tiny illegal aliens. "What was the argument about, Grace?"

"Nothing much." She picked at a flaw in the concrete picnic table. "Those commercials."

"Commercials?"

"On TV, the drug companies." Her cheeks flushed. "You know how they pretend you could die any minute without their latest overpriced drug, and in case that doesn't depress you enough, they rattle off all the lethal side effects."

I nodded, agreeing a thousand percent but saying nothing, following Vic's advice never to influence the witness.

Breathing heavily my client went on, "You know what depresses me—her—the most? All the helpless animals being tortured to death every day to test their goddamn drugs. It's enough to drive a person psycho!"

"Sounds like you're even more upset over this than Grace is."

She frowned. "*I'm* Grace, Mrs. Mildew. My housemate's name is *Sue*. She's the one stalking *me*."

I leaned back and nearly fell off the backless bench. "Of course you are! I'm so sorry; I don't know why I got you mixed up. Anyway, we need to solve your problem, pronto." I paused so she could ask about my fee, but after an awkward silence I went on, "What level of service were you looking for, Grace?"

"Oh, just the basics—watch for any suspicious characters sneaking around outside. Here's a picture of Sue. You can keep it."

Much to my surprise, the photo she handed me looked like the Grace of my imagination. She had dark, wavy hair, probably tinted because her face was sixtyish, and she looked thin, sitting in a recliner with a cat on her lap and a dog at her feet.

"This is helpful, Grace. To be honest, for your safety I recommend the indoor surveillance with a hidden camera." Mental note: get Vic to spring for a surveillance camera pronto.

She folded her arms. "No, that won't do. I can't stand the idea of strangers tramping around in my home."

My client didn't sound particularly anxious to catch the criminal. Why was she so defensive about the inside of her house? Her unusual attitude made me determined to find out what she was hiding.

"We could put a camera *outside* the house, if you prefer. That way you'd have twenty-four hour coverage instead of my being there only while you're at work."

After hesitating for a moment, she agreed to let me go on the property the following day to place the camera outdoors. Asking for money was the hardest part of my job, but I mustered the courage to request thirty dollars cash in advance for the first day, well below what a licensed P.I. would charge.

Coolly, Grace reached into her Gucci purse and handed me a fifty dollar note, telling me to keep the change.

It felt good being on the receiving end of the money, but at the same time the desert heat was getting to me. My prayer for a brisk wind being ignored, I took the portable mini-fan from my tote bag and aimed the barely discernible breeze at my face.

"Now, Grace, can you tell me when the stalking began?"

She leaned forward to catch a breath of my fan. "It started after she—Sue—had been gone a week. When I came home from work I had a feeling that things had been moved around, although I couldn't put my finger on anything specific."

"Hmm. What did you think had happened?"

"It had to be someone with a key, and nobody else has one. We have no kids. The spare key was under the gnome statue in the back patio, exactly where I put it."

"You said Sue works at home. How does she make her income?"

"Editing technical manuals for Chinese manufacturers. With all her stocks and CDs she's not hurting for income, but she's so greedy, she always wants more."

"So all the time she's away from home, she's losing money?"

The client smoothed out a wrinkle in her rnuumuu. "No, she took her laptop with her."

My mini-fan sputtered and I tapped it on the table until it ran smoothly again. "Why do you suppose Sue would be stalking you, Grace?"

"I have no idea, but it's freaking me out. That's why I'm packing my late husband's gun." She took a Hi Point 9mm pistol from her purse and pointed it at me.

Too surprised to flinch, I was mesmerized by the gun's seductive metallic color which was somewhere in the orchid-lilac-mauve range.

"For the past week I've been hearing creepy noises day and night, not sure if they're real or my imagination. I even called a psychic to see if there's a ghost, but she was too pricey. Even Bibi and Bubu are getting upset, poor babies."

"Your pets?"

"My children, I call them, because I spoil them as if they were," she said with guilty pride. "A barkless Basenji dog and an Abyssinian cat."

I wondered why she said 'my' instead of 'our' pets. "Ah, you like the African breeds, do you ? My favorites as well. I hope the dog's bite isn't worse than his bark," I quipped.

"Don't worry, he'll be indoors when you come, Mrs. Mildew."

With a final despairing cough my fan gave out. I stood up to leave and handed her my card. "Please call me Millie. I'll be over tomorrow morning around nine to install the camera, if that's all right with you."

"Fine. I'll be at work, but go right ahead, Millie."

Vic wasn't thrilled about paying for a surveillance camera, but I convinced him we'd find more uses for it in the future. The battery-operated four-inch cube had a memory card that played back on a computer, and it fit easily into my oversized tote bag.

On Tuesday morning the predicted storm was gearing up and I didn't like having to wear a raincoat, but it had the advantage of hiding my new Stun Master telescoping stun baton. I'd recently made it my weapon of choice to replace a Walther PPK automatic and a short-range taser. Although I didn't expect to use the weapon any time soon, I placed it in my belt holster to practice quick draws in my spare time.

The Lagonda was too conspicuous for this job, so Vic dropped me off at Grace's address in the Starr Pass area. He volunteered to help me mount the camera, but I wanted to handle the mission on my own to prove I could, and said I'd call him when I was finished.

Approaching the house, I noticed a boat-tailed grackle strutting about on the roof, its beak clamped on a lump of food like a dog kibble, which another grackle was trying to swipe. In my neighborhood, grackles steal dog food and dunk it in my bird bath, leaving a mushy mess to clean up. Their resemblance to crows made me wonder if groups of them are called "a murder of grackles." In any case, I hoped these two weren't a bad omen.

The house and lot were larger than the average Tucson property, as if it had been custom built. The design was unusual in that the front porch was a good four feet higher than ground level suggesting a basement—an item unheard of in Tucson.

Walking around to the back yard, I noticed the lower level did indeed have a narrow window. Roughly four feet long by two feet high, it had no latches and was covered by security bars. A roll blind inside was cracked open at the bottom, not enough to see what was inside even when I leaned close to the bars.

The back yard looked neglected, its only points of interest being the gnome Grace had mentioned where the spare key was hidden, and an empty birdbath. The grackle currently owning the kibble flew down and cocked an indignant yellow eye at me, telepathing, *"Where's my dunking water, lady?"*

I wasn't able to walk all the way around the house because the garage extended out to the fence, but I noted an access door from the garage to the yard. There must also be a door inside the garage opening into the house, providing convenient access for a stalker.

Adjoining the house was a patio covered by an awning, and its supports provided several spots where the camera could be mounted unobtrusively. Standing on one of the wrought-iron patio chairs, I aimed the lens so it covered both the kitchen door and the garage door, and attached the camera securely with industrial-strength Velcro.

Proud of my handiwork, I headed for the front of the house to call Vic and wait for him to pick me up. As I passed the basement window, my intuition nudged me to take a second look. The blind was now rolled up a few inches higher than before. Leaning my face against the bars I tried to see inside, but the window was dusty and the interior too dark to make out anything but a blurry movement.

While part of my brain was questioning the difference in the appearance of the blind, I flipped open my cell phone and began dialing Vic's number. At the same time I heard a faint cry that sounded like "Help me!"

Couldn't be. My left ear had a touch of tinnitus from answering phones, which sometimes gave me aural hallucinations, but the words kept echoing in my head so I reached through the bars and knocked on the window.

This time there was no mistake. "Help! Please help me!"

"Who are you?" I yelled back.

"Grace Dale. Please let me out of here!" The voice sounded higher than I remembered, perhaps due to stress.

"Grace? I thought you were at work."

The volume rose to a shout. "Never mind! Just get me out of here! The front door key is over there by the patio, under the gnome."

"I know, you told me yesterday. Hang on." Running over to the ugly statue I turned it on its side. No key. I tilted my head back to look through the closeup part of my bifocals. Nope.

I ran back to the window. "The key is gone."

A Warthog jet from Davis-Monthan Air Base drowned out my words. It was near the end of the month and the 355th Squadron pilots were getting in their hours, interrupting conversations along their flight path throughout the day. I repeated that there was no key.

Opening the blind even more, the prisoner rubbed a clean spot in the window with her sleeve and pressed her face to the glass. "Who are you? I didn't tell you anything yesterday, or any other day."

Amazing! I pulled out the photo I'd been given in the park. The features were a perfect match for the person I'd been told was Sue Mote.

A breathless pause ensued while my brain labored to make sense of the situation. If this person was the real Grace Dale, who was the woman I'd met? Was it Sue Mote—or someone else entirely?

The woman tapped sharply on the window. "I said, *who are you?*"

"Mildew, private investigator." I showed her my card. "Someone calling herself Grace Dale told me she was being stalked by her housemate, Sue Mote."

"That bitch! I can tell you all about Sue Mote. Will you get me out of here or what?"

"Depends if I can pick the locks," I shouted as another Warthog rent the air. "I don't do deadbolts."

The woman's frown changed to surprise, then horror as she looked beyond my left shoulder.

Cold metal pressed into my neck.

"I thought you might need a little supervision, Millie."

I knew the voice. "Hi, *Grace*," I said with heavy sarcasm. "I suppose you'd like your money back."

"And then some. Get up. Give me that." Keeping the 9mm pointed at me, the real Sue Mote (I assumed) grabbed my tote and dumped the contents on the ground—overlooking the stun baton holstered at my waist under the raincoat. Nor did she appear to notice the surveillance camera tucked up under the patio awning. Walking over to the birdbath she tipped it up and retrieved a key which I suspected was the same one missing from under the gnome. Didn't trust me, huh? She handed me the key and told me to unlock the kitchen door.

Poking the gun into my back she pushed me across the kitchen to a hallway and stopped at a door that was secured by a slide bolt. It opened on a flight of stairs leading down, and as we reached the bottom I noticed the window I'd seen from the other side.

The basement was furnished like a one-room apartment with a kitchenette. The real Grace Dale (I assumed) was reclining on the bed propped up with pillows, a stack of books beside her, no television in sight. Across the room was a desk with a green-shaded banker's light, pens, stapler, paper clips—the usual office paraphernalia.

Someone was missing. Avoiding their eyes, I used the Solomon approach. "Where do you keep your Basenji and your Abyssinian?" I figured that whoever answered first would be the rightful owner of the animals.

"Stolen from me, that's where they are!" the kidnapee whined. "Sue Mote is a sadistic bitch, you see."

My former client shoved me into the nearest chair and dragged another one next to it, motioning with her gun for Grace to join me. "My little darlings are watching Animal Planet in the living room, on the sofa, which used to be strictly forbidden by Her Majesty here," she said, grimacing at her housemate.

As the gun's safety catch was off I resisted making any heroic moves, although I was dying to try out my Stun Master baton. In a soothing, phony psychiatrist voice I said, "Perhaps if you told me what you think you're doing, I might be able to solve your problem."

With glazed, vacant eyes Sue muttered, "Now I'll have to kill both of them. What the hell am I supposed to do with *two* dead bodies?"

"That's where I can help." I leaned forward eagerly until the aim of the Hi Point suggested I reverse direction even more eagerly. "I'm nearly a certified private eye, remember? I know all kinds of ways to dispose of bodies without a trace."

Sue gave a dry laugh. "I know what you're doing—you're buying time. Well, it's working. Grace, get me a cup of coffee."

"Me too, please," I piped up.

Rolling her eyes, Grace got up and went to the kitchenette where a full pot was steaming on the coffee maker.

I turned to Sue. "You said two dead bodies, as if you'd only been planning on one."

"Right, that's why I hired *you*, Millie. Lot of use that turned out to be. All you've done is make things extremely awkward."

"Me? I don't see how—"

"What do you care? You won't be telling the cops."

"I know, but it's a Mafia rule that when you kill a person you have to tell someone, otherwise the secret will kill you. Trust me," I lied, "my uncle was John Gotti." I stared into her eyes until they wavered and looked away.

I was counting on the old movie cliché, which also happens to be a real-life cliché, where the killer is so desperate to brag about his genius that he confesses to the victim, because dead men don't talk.

As Grace approached with a steaming mug in each hand, Sue grabbed one of the mugs and smashed it to pieces on the floor. Coffee splashed in a wide arc that included the Oriental rug and my khaki slacks. Then she pulled up a chair for herself, took the other mug from Grace's shaking hands and sipped her coffee daintily, leaving me to inhale the thirst-arousing aroma.

The stun baton bored into my right hip as I sat in the narrow armchair. What a ripoff if I died before getting to test it out on a criminal. The thought goaded me to press on for a complete confession. My stubborn curiosity was as desperate to know the truth as a dumb crook is to brag.

I hoped flattery would loosen her tongue. "I must say you had very good taste in picking me to help you, based on my book."

Sue laughed so hard I could see the gold in her molars. "I hired you because I thought you were retarded, but maybe you're not as dumb as you look."

It was my turn to laugh. "That's what Vic always says—he's the owner of Ace Investigations. Sorry I can't say 'great minds think alike' because I haven't seen anything great about yours."

Grace found her voice. "Oh, Sue has a great mind, all right. Her brilliant idea was to steal my identity and my house and my precious pets. The only reason she hasn't killed me yet is 'cause she's waiting for my last CD to come due next month and make me withdraw it. She's already forced me to sign over everything else, including the deed to this house."

I frowned at Sue. "What did you need me for?"

"Alibi! You were my alibi, my witness that I was being terrorized by a stalker. For obvious reasons I couldn't involve the cops." She took a gulp of coffee. "Then after I killed her, I'd say she broke in and tried to kill me." I thought she was a prowler who was about to kill *me*."

"But why did you have to switch identities? You don't even look like her."

"Don't worry, I will. You see, the mistakeThe weight gain I'll have to explain away, but there's bound to be some financial details I've overlooked. If I'd just plain killed her and buried her in the yard, eventually the cops would have come a-knockin', and the whole ball of wax would've unraveled."

"That's a mixed metaphor."

"Huh?"

"Diabolical," I said. "But the surveillance camera would have done you in anyway."

Sue sneered. "Thanks for reminding me to destroy it—but it wouldn't have picked up anything because there was nothing to pick up."

"Exactly. First of all, Vic knows you have a spy camera which he paid dearly for. Second of all, no activity would have meant there was no prowler." I sighed. "Why couldn't you work things out and avoid a charge of attempted murder?"

Grace intervened. "Because Sue is wacko. Maybe she told you how we met, how she had nothing and I let her share my house rent free."

It was perfectly obvious now that when Sue was masquerading as Grace, the "stalker" she had described was, in fact, herself.

"The two of you got along well for ten years, didn't you?"

"Till I got a new flat-screen TV last year," Grace said bitterly. "Sue went berserk because I wouldn't mute the sound every time one of those stupid drug commercials came on. I told her it was my TV, and if she didn't like it—"

"You knew those goddam commercials were driving me crazy," Sue yelled. "You wanted to have me committed!" She started to wave the gun around again, the safety off, her finger dangerously close to the trigger.

"Excuse me," I said, "why couldn't you just move to separate parts of the house and get two television sets, like smart married couples do instead of divorcing?"

Sue bristled. "Because of my pets."

"My pets!" Grace said shrilly. "They were mine before she came. She just decided she owned them. It's really Bibi and Bubu that are at the bottom of all this. She refuses to share them with me."

"They love me best."

"No they don't, they love the treats—that's why they're obese, like you."

Grace's voice had a sharp edge that drew blood to Sue's face. It seemed likely that constant cuts like that would drive an unstable person over the edge, and Sue appeared to be on the brink as she aimed the pistol at her benefactor.

I broke in, raising my voice. "Sue, have you figured out what to do with our bodies yet? It's a very big problem, you know, trying to get rid of two dead bodies."

"You're supposed to help me. We don't need this ugly old hag any more. I'll just have to get that last CD myself, once I've totally assumed her identity."

"If you kill Grace, I won't help you." My throat was so dry it felt like sandpaper, and my voice sounded the same.

She lowered the gun. "Well, hurry up then, I haven't got all day. I told the museum I had a dental appointment with Dr. Magill, and they'll get suspicious."

"First I need some coffee, because my voice is giving out," I stage-whispered.

"Grace, get Millie some coffee."

"You get it, bitch."

"I'll get it myself." Ignoring Sue's pistol-brandishing, I walked over to the Mr. Coffee machine. Usually I didn't take it black, but the thirst-quenching effect was all I cared about now. That, and its use as a weapon.

"Thank you, Sue, I really appreciate the coffee," I said, trying to look humble, keeping my eyes on the steaming mug as I shuffled to the chair between Grace's and Sue's.

Pausing as if I were about to sit, I swiveled toward Sue and aimed the coffee at her face. I missed. The hot liquid hit her neck, dripped down her cleavage and inside her muumuu.

Screaming in pain and surprise she fired the gun with a deafening bang. The bullet passed somewhere near me, judging by the draft I felt on my pants leg. She dropped the weapon, giving me a chance to kick it out of her reach.

Whipping aside my raincoat I grabbed the stun baton and pulled to release it from the holster. It refused. Luckily I'd practiced quick draws earlier so I got it unstuck while Sue was on all fours trying to reach her gun.

I pressed the lever to activate the baton. Nothing happened. Then I remembered to switch it on, at which point the shiny silver electrified arm shot out with a fierce crackling sound while blue flashes sparked on the tip. I flinched.

By that time Sue had retrieved the pistol and hoisted her bulk back onto her feet. Lunging for me she grabbed the baton by the shaft, deftly avoiding the tip. She wasn't as deft as she thought, for the shaft was also charged. Her face turned red, white and blue in quick succession but she didn't go down and kept trying to aim at my chest.

Reaching out with the baton I zapped her on the arm. She teetered, then collapsed with a bone-cracking thump, sending the gun skidding across the tiles. With a couple of twitches she lay still.

"Oh, my god!" Grace glared at me as if I hadn't just saved her life. "Is she dead?"

"If the manual is correct, probably not. Would you mind pouring me some more coffee while I dial 911?" I was thirsty enough to drink a lake—and also ready to pee a lake, now that the dust had settled.

Grace pointed out the bathroom. "What's that on your foot?" she said.

Blood was oozing from a nine-millimeter hole in the toe of my new Enzo Angiolini loafers. Shit! Taking off my shoe I found that the bullet had passed neatly between my pinkie and pre-pinkie toes which—their secret exposed—began to hurt like hell. The bullet had continued through the sole of the shoe and cracked the floor tile I was standing on, where it now lodged.

Vic arrived along with the ambulance and the police. He told me he'd known something was wrong when I didn't call him after an hour. "Good work, Mildew," he said with a grin. "You're not as dumb as you look." That's his idea of a compliment, but he has a good heart.

Long story short, Grace got her pets and her house back.

Sue regained her sanity after moving to the Pima County Jail for her offenses against Grace, but I wished she could have gone to Sheriff Joe Arpaio's no-frills Tent City in Phoenix.

My toes will never be the same.

