

A detailed pencil sketch of a woman's face and upper torso. She has long, wavy hair and is looking slightly to the right. Her right hand is raised to her chin, with her index finger pointing upwards. The drawing is done in a soft, shaded style with fine lines and cross-hatching for shading.

DEAD SILENCE

KATIE GRAY

Dead Silence

by

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Dedication

My thanks as always to my family and wonderful friends, who have supported and encouraged me throughout a difficult year.

I dedicate the book to my late husband, my greatest fan and a tower of strength when I was struggling with my writing on occasions. I miss him every day.

About the Author



Katie has always enjoyed writing, although mostly just for pleasure. A few years ago she joined a writing group, and shortly after wrote a memoir - intended mainly for her grandchildren (for when they were a little older). She entered a number of writing competitions and was shortlisted a few times, and wrote some children's stories, once again for her grandchildren.

This cosy crime novel series resulted from an idea of her husband's and she now has four books in the series.

Her books are not meant to be anything other than entertaining - the events are mostly improbable, highly unlikely and thoroughly implausible.

Chapter One

At last, a restful break visiting Mum in Suffolk. Our plan was to stay for around ten days, take Mum out for some nice meals, and explore the area.

Mum lives in a retirement complex, which has facilities and help on hand for older people. That's not to say she's decrepit or even that old! But after Dad died, a smaller house with assistance nearby was ideal.

There is a Community Centre and around two hundred houses. Mum's always been a busy woman so she enjoys Pilates, a book club, and a knitting and embroidery group.

The complex is only a mile or so from the coast, and the management run a small coach most days for shopping purposes. It's a pleasant, comfortable place to live.

Jack looks on Ma, as he calls her, as his mother too. His parents were killed in an accident when he was a baby, and he was brought up by his grandparents. They were lovely people. We missed them very much when they died within months of each other a few years ago.

The journey wasn't bad. There was not too much traffic on the motorway, and the minor roads were almost empty. We rolled up to the gate and punched in the code about half past three. Mum lives near the Community Centre in a close of four houses, each with a small garden.

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As we pulled up the front door was flung open, and there was Mum holding out her arms. I hugged her tight then Jack picked her up and swung her round - not too difficult as she's even smaller than me!

We piled into the hall with our various bags and bits. The house is light and quite roomy, which means space for visitors.

"I thought we'd eat in tonight darlings. Tomorrow I've booked us in to a restaurant I just know you'll love. There'll even be enough food to fill you up Jack!" Mum adores him, and this plan earned her a big plonker from my husband.

"Ma, you're a star," he said. "I can't wait."

Once we'd eaten and settled down for a chat, I broached the subject she'd mentioned over the phone.

"Now then Mum, you said there were some problems with the neighbours?" I said.

She wrinkled her forehead. "I don't have a problem, but the three of them appear to. It started with Anne, she lives next door. I was in the garden one day, when she ran out of her house looking very upset. Of course I asked her what was wrong. But all she said was someone had been in the house. Well I said, let's call the police, but no she didn't want that. Anyway, she came in and had a cup of tea and said she'd been left a card. The message on the card was "Love for Sale". Now we know what a phrase like that used to mean, don't we?"

I blinked a bit. "What did she say?"

Mum pursed her lips. “Nothing at all, so what could I say? She only moved in about six months ago and goes out a lot, so I hardly know her. We’re just on general chatting terms.”

“When was this?” Jack asked.

“Ooh a month perhaps, but nothing seems to have happened since, or at least, not to her.”

“What do you mean – at least not to her?” I said.

“Well there’s Harry, he lives two doors down. About three weeks ago I saw him standing outside his house looking agitated. I was just going out and he called me, and asked if I’d seen any strangers hanging around. Well I hadn’t, but then he said someone had been in his house. I was going to suggest calling the police, but he just went indoors. Then next day I was gardening and Bill, the guy who lives in the end house, strolled down. We’d hardly spoken before, but suddenly he said someone had been in *his* house and had I seen anything? And that’s about it really. I took the liberty of telling them you’re private investigators and perhaps you could look into things.”

“I’m not sure there’s a lot we can do if no one’s saying much. We have to have something other than dead silence,” Jack was worrying his lower lip.

“It’s not exactly dead silence is it? At least Anne showed me what her visitor had left behind – and do stop playing with your lip Jack, it’ll finish up twice its size.” Mum gave him a hard stare.

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As I'm always telling him the same thing, I almost applauded. But Jack had made a good point. Unless we could get the neighbours to open up, we'd be stymied.

Mum said, "Suppose you have a chat with Anne and maybe the other two will come on board? I'll introduce you tomorrow."

With that, we decided to call it a night. As we settled into bed, I couldn't help sighing. I'd wanted us to have a holiday free from brain fag. Still, I thought, it's obviously some mischief-maker, and if we keep our eyes peeled we'll soon spot them.

What sort of idiot am I?

Chapter Two

Next day after a lazy morning, we drove to Mum's restaurant. It was all she said it would be, and in a lovely little coastal town. The food was to die for.

We'd settled for water with the meal as Jack was driving, but Mum promised us a decent bottle of wine when we got home. As we left the restaurant the sky was clouding over, which made the thought of her comfortable sitting room appealing.

As we drove up, Mum's next door neighbour was unlocking her front door.

"I'll introduce you," Mum said softly, "and you can get the lie of the land."

Oh pook, I thought. I'd been looking forward to chilling out, but I supposed we couldn't really do anything else.

Anne was a nice looking lady, probably in her mid-fifties. Long, curling lustrous dark hair and a figure which was well proportioned and only a tad overweight (tsk tsk, Pipsy!). I was reminded of Joan Collins or maybe Elizabeth Taylor.

She spoke very carefully, as though she was rehearsing each sentence. But, not unexpectedly she eyed Jack with obvious pleasure.

Before she could get too carried away I said, "My mother said you've had a problem. Perhaps if you can spare the time tomorrow, you'd like to tell us about it?"

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“Yes, that would do: tomorrow morning sometime?” She looked at Jack from beneath lowered lashes as she said this. He smiled (of course) and said, “We’d be delighted.” I thought she was a little disappointed at the “we”.

“Whatever time suits,” she said, her voice taking on a throaty drawl. Shades of Lauren Bacall, I almost laughed out loud.

As we trooped into the house Mum and I glanced at each other, then away. We’d both spotted a “come on” if ever there was one. However I’m seldom troubled by instances of that kind – they happen all the time to my gorgeous husband!

The bottle of wine and a bit of telly proved to be a winner. In fact we were contemplating opening a second bottle when the doorbell rang.

“Botheration,” Mum said, “I don’t want to see anyone tonight.” Nevertheless she trotted to the front door and opened it. We could hear a male voice talking in a subdued fashion for a few minutes then Mum came in followed by a tallish man, with what I thought was a smug face.

Before she could utter a word, he strode over to Jack with his hand out saying, “I’m Harry Davis. Your mother says you’re a “private eye”, I want your help.”

I was totally ignored, which didn’t particularly bother me, as without even knowing the man I didn’t like him. Jack looked him up and down and said, “I’m sure my mother-in-law must

have told you we are private investigators, and not as you put it 'private eyes'?"

"Whatever," Harry Davis said. "I've got a problem and your mother-in-law seems to think you can help, so just tell me your charges and we'll get down to business."

I hadn't met anyone quite so obnoxious for a while, and I've met a few in my time.

"We can't discuss anything this evening," Jack said. "How about the day after tomorrow?"

I thought Mr. Obnoxious was going to explode. His face reddened and his eyes bulged.

"The day after tomorrow?! I need to discuss this matter now."

Mum stepped in. "Be quiet Harry, you've had your answer and that's it. Come back in a couple of days. Now off you go, we're enjoying a quiet family evening... Goodnight." As she talked she urged him into the hall and out of the house. She came back and sat down.

"Ma you're wonderful, I loved the way you handled him," Jack said. I was unsurprised. I'd seen Mum in action before.

"He's all blow that man," Mum said. "I never take much notice of him. I think he was an estate agent or something, and you know how they can talk, most of it rubbish." Thus she dismissed him.

“What’s Bill like?” I asked idly.

“He’s quite different to Harry, a quiet man. As I said, we’ve hardly spoken. Still, I’m sure you’ll meet him in the next day or so, and you can make up your own minds.” She got to her feet. “Well darlings I’m for bed, apart from that silly b....r Harry it’s been a lovely day.”

Jack said. “Yes it certainly has. After we’ve talked to Anne in the morning we’ll take a trip somewhere shall we?”

Chapter Three

Saturday dawned with overcast skies. Oh dear I thought, don't say the weather is going to put a damper on things. However, after breakfast those skies had cheered up and the sun deigned to peek through now and again.

We decided to invite Anne in around eleven o'clock.

"We'll go somewhere for lunch afterward," Jack said. "With any luck it won't take too long to find out what's going on." I wondered as usual, why Jack frequently assumes whatever it is "won't take too long".

Anne arrived looking as though she was fresh from her beautician. Her hair was perfect, her make-up immaculate, and she wore a superbly tailored suit. I felt rather untidy.

Mum saw my expression and winked at me. She ushered Anne into the sitting room and offered coffee.

It was declined in the "Lauren Bacall" tone as she sat down and crossed her legs, carefully showing slightly more thigh than strictly necessary.

Mum said, "I'll leave you to it then," and went into the kitchen, clearing her throat. I wanted to do the same, but I took a pull at myself and kept a straight face.

"Now Anne," Jack said, "what seems to be the problem?"

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She looked at him tilting her head and lowering her lashes. She must have studied Bacall very closely I thought.

“It was a few weeks ago. I had been working with my personal trainer,” she began, “I like to train most days to keep in shape.” She paused briefly, perhaps hoping for a compliment in response. As nothing was forthcoming she went on, “I opened the front door and I knew something was wrong. I’m very sensitive.” She paused again. (Get on with it, I thought).

“I found this on my kitchen table,” she opened her handbag and produced the card with its cryptic message.

I took the card and studied it. “Does this have some meaning for you?” I looked her in the eye, or tried to. She was still ogling Jack.

“I...I...can’t say,” she seemed to notice me for the first time. “It’s nothing to me. I can only think that I’ve been mistaken for someone else.”

I said, “If that’s what you think why not talk to the police? How did this intruder get into your house? Were there signs of a break in? He or she could have had a key. It can’t be comfortable thinking that someone can come and go as they please?”

“I don’t know what to think. It’s been so distressing: I mean, I’m a woman on her own with no one to protect me, sleep is becoming a problem. I jump at every sound. I’d rather not involve the police so what should I do?” Again she employed the tilted head and the husky drawl.

“Where did you live before you moved here?” I asked. “It could be someone from your past who wants to spoil your life?”

“I had homes in various places, I moved around quite a lot. My career you know.”

Well, well I thought, this is more like it.

“What was your line of work?” Jack said.

She looked surprised. I thought she wasn’t going to answer as the seconds ticked by and she didn’t speak.

“I was a businesswoman,” she said finally. “I ran an agency which provided female help for important people.”

“What kind of help?” I asked.

“All kinds.”

“Well, secretaries, nannies, housekeepers? What?” I said

“Not exactly that kind of help.” She was being evasive, but if she thought I was giving up she was mistaken.

“What exactly? For example, did you provide young ladies to accompany businessmen to functions?” This time she looked *me* in the eye.

“I...I...well, sort of. High powered businessmen would contact me and I’d find suitable companions.” Anne was not quite so throaty now and her face had an oddly stony appearance.

“How did these men contact you?” Jack said.

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She swallowed and said, "I had a discreet advertisement in very good taste. There was nothing that could be misunderstood." I'll bet, I thought.

"So in a nutshell, all you did was supply young ladies to accompany businessmen to social gatherings, am I right?" Jack gave her a long look.

She nodded.

"And nothing more?" I asked.

"If you mean what I think you mean, I can only say that if my girls, err... my young ladies chose to do more, it was not my affair."

"Was your business successful?" Jack said.

"Moderately...quite... that is, shall we say I built up a reputation?"

I thought yes, let's say that. But my instincts told me that Anne had been more than just a "businesswoman".

"My feeling is," Jack said slowly, "that this problem of yours could very well be tied into your business."

Anne frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Possibly someone from your past, so if you hear from them again let us know immediately. Are you quite certain you don't want the police involved?"

“I’m certain.” There was no sign of the throaty drawl now. The legs were uncrossed, and she tugged at the hem of her skirt as she leant forward.

“It’s all wrong,” she said. “I spent a lot of money making my house comfortable, and all I want is peace and quiet. Why is someone doing this to me?”

“Someone who either doesn’t like you, or thinks you owe them something.” I almost felt sorry for her.

“Oh God, please can you help me.” She looked beseechingly first at me then at Jack.

“We’ll do what we can of course, but remember this: you can’t maintain a dead silence about anything that could be useful.” Jack looked at her sternly.

I thought she was going to burst into tears but instead she stood up and held out her hand. “Whatever your fees are I’ll pay them. Just please help me.” The sexy, film star look had all but disappeared. In its place was a seemingly frightened woman. The change in her was remarkably rapid.

“We’ll talk about fees when we get a grip on the situation,” Jack said.

“Try and stay calm,” I told her. “The chances are your mystery intruder is hoping you’ll be so scared, that when he or she finally puts the bite on you’ll agree to anything.”

“You’ve got to act natural. Carry on your everyday life and don’t appear nervous. I know it might be easier said than

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done, but give it your best.” I tried to sound bracing. It must have worked, because she made her way to the front door even calling “Goodbye” to Mum as she passed the kitchen.

“Whew,” I said. “She appears to be one worried lady, but I can’t help wondering why she’s so evasive: she’s not told us the half of it.”

Jack grinned. “Pipps, you and I are playing from the same deck. If she didn’t know what her girls...err...ladies got up to after work – then I’m Cynthia Payne.”

We both laughed. In fact we were still laughing as Mum came in to see if we wanted a coffee.

“I’m assuming it went well,” she said.

“I don’t know about well, but it certainly was interesting,” I said.

Chapter Four

We spent a pleasant afternoon touring around the area, finally ending up at a pub which served cream teas!

On the journey home I asked Mum how long Harry and Bill had lived nearby.

“Well, Harry was living on the estate when I moved in. I don’t know about Bill. But they arrived in the close just three or four months apart. I think neither of them needed anywhere too big as they were on their own. And no, I don’t know if either of them has been married or had a partner. We’re not on those terms.”

Having met Harry I could see why.

We all opted for an early night. In my case I was thinking ahead to our meeting with Harry – and not with pleasure.

The next morning just after breakfast, the phone rang. It was Harry asking when he could come round. Mum pulled a face but said sweetly, “Make it about an hour. We should be all ready by then.”

We discussed our plan of action. Mum said she would pop to the Centre for a while and clear the way for us. Jack and I felt it might be a little longer than ‘a while’, but the thought of putting up with Harry for too long was not appealing. When Mum came back we’d have an excuse to wind up the proceedings.

He must have been watching, for she'd barely left when he was on the doorstep. He didn't improve on second viewing. Smug, almost cocky in the way he swaggered in and plonked himself into a chair without invitation.

"I haven't got a lot of time," was his opening. "So let's get on with it. How much do you charge?"

Jack looked him over. "It depends on the problem and the amount of time and effort it's going to take to solve it. We'll say..." he named a sum somewhat above our usual rate, "plus expenses."

"Yes, that'll do," Harry said. "Now then, down to cases. I'm retired, but I was a businessman." Uh-oh, I thought.

"What exactly was your business?" I asked.

He looked at me as if he'd only just realised I was there, much as Anne had done. I thought he wasn't going to answer.

"I was in property," he said at last. "Buying. Renovating. Renting. A developer for want of a better term."

"And exactly what is this problem that's arisen?" Jack said.

"Someone has invited themselves into my house and left – well, I suppose you'd call it a message."

We looked at him and waited.

"This message, I don't know what it means, but it feels threatening," he shifted in his chair a little.

“So do you have the message with you?” I said.

“Yes, yes I do, I thought you might want to look it over,” he produced an envelope from his pocket. “Here it is.”

In the envelope was a card similar to the one Anne had received. It read “Visitors come and go. But this is no hotel”.

“What do you think it means?” Jack said.

“I told you, how would I know, it’s what I’m going to pay you to find out isn’t it? But mostly I want to know who sent it and how they err...err...” he tailed off.

I would have given a lot to know what he’d been going to say.

He stood up. “Can you start straight away? How long will it take? I’ve got important business underway so I want it settled quickly.”

“It will take as long as it takes, as they say,” Jack told him. “I should mention you’re not the only one who’s having problems.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry said.

“One of your neighbours is in a similar state.”

“Who? Who’s in a similar state?” He looked a bit agitated.

“Can’t tell you at this stage,” Jack said. “But we’ll do our best for you. We always do. We’ve been investigators for some

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time, and we're very experienced." He stopped speaking and gave Harry a long look.

A few minutes later Mum arrived home, and Harry pushed off. I hadn't cared for the man from the moment I met him, and now I felt that he was someone to look into more closely.

We had a bite of lunch and took a stroll around the estate. It had been developed quite considerably in the time Mum had lived there. Plans had been produced for extending the leisure facilities she said. Tennis courts, a bowling green and possibly a small leisure complex. There was certainly the space as most of the surrounding area was rather scrubby. According to Mum, the locals were in favour of the development.

As we were on our way back, a woman with a dog came out of one of the houses backing onto the close. She nodded and smiled.

Mum said, "This is Freda. She's a newer resident. What is it six weeks?" she asked.

Freda said, "Just coming up for two months. I'd been waiting quite a long time to find a property here, but it's been worth the wait." She smiled again and moved off saying to Mum, "See you at the book club."

"She's always very pleasant," Mum said. "Friendly, although I don't know anything about her other than she has no family. She's not as lucky as me." We all beamed at each other.

“She assists Martin the manager part-time, and also helps the more infirm residents by walking their dogs or shopping.”

We spent the afternoon watching a DVD. It was an old Alfred Hitchcock film “North by Northwest,” which is a great favourite of ours. The house at Mount Rushmore which features near the end of the film resembles one we were forced to visit a few years ago. It makes me feel a bit queasy sometimes.

As we were deciding what we should have for supper the doorbell rang, followed by some agitated knocking.

“Good grief, what now?” Mum said.

Anne was on the doorstep accompanied by Harry, and another man whom I assumed was Bill.

“They’ve been back,” was Anne’s greeting.

“We’ve all had visitors,” Harry said. Bill stood by without speaking. He was a stocky, fit looking man, with rugged rather coarse features.

“You’d better come in,” Mum told them.

“So what’s happened this time?” Jack asked.

Harry of course was off the mark in a flash. “We’ve each had more of those messages.”

“I don’t think we’ve met have we?” Jack said to Bill. “I assume you’re having the same problem?”

Bill looked at Jack as if weighing him up. "I've had a couple of messages. The first one was a card saying "You should have put the boot in". This one was a card with the words "Where were you?" And that's all I can tell you,"

"What about you two, is it more of the same?" I asked.

Anne got in first. "This time it's a pair of bracelets linked by a chain."

"And the card...?"

"The words are "No getting away". I think the bracelets are meant to be handcuffs. Oh, this is awful."

Harry took over. "I've got a key and the words "You need to be locked up." It's meaningless."

"Not to someone," Jack said. "I'm sure it's not meaningless to the perpetrator."

No one spoke, but as I looked at them I thought these three knew each other much better than they're letting on.

"What are you going to do?" Harry was first off the mark of course. His face was flushed and belligerent.

"I'm going to make a suggestion. Perhaps we should have CCTV installed somewhere discreet. If the intruder comes again they'll be caught on camera. Then we can proceed from there." Jack looked from one to another.

"Good, good, I was going to suggest something like that myself." Harry was trying to recover ground.

I thought, pull the other one you pompous idiot!

"I'll ring a colleague first thing tomorrow and make arrangements if you like?" Jack looked at him blandly.

"Oh, I don't know if we want anyone else involved," Anne said. I noted the use of the 'we'.

I said, "Don't worry, our colleague is very discreet. Besides we work on a 'need to know' basis." Need to know - what a porky, I thought! Charlie's just going to love this - Charlie of course is our Man Friday.

She looked a little less worried.

Then Harry pitched in again. "How long is all this going to take, and incidentally how much?"

"Be assured," Jack said calmly, "The surveillance will be in place in a couple of days, and it won't cost an arm and a leg."

Through all of this Bill had remained silent and still. I couldn't quite get to grips with him. He was definitely the odd man out.

"Do what you think is best," Anne said. She bore less resemblance to the woman to whom we'd spoken two days ago. "We'll talk to you again when your colleague comes." Suddenly she looked as though she couldn't get out quickly enough. I thought Harry was going to speak, but he followed her out after a sideways look at Bill. Bill still hadn't spoken. Then he said, "Make sure you keep this quiet."

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I felt myself flush. "What sort of investigators do you think we are? We're professional that's why we're successful." I jutted my chin at him.

"Just thought I'd mention it." He seemed untroubled by my response, and strolled calmly out of the house.

I shrugged and we moved into the kitchen to talk to Mum about supper. I glanced out of the window.

"Look at this," I said to Jack.

"What, what?" Mum had opened the fridge and he'd been peering over her shoulder to check what was on offer in the way of food.

Our three visitors were standing outside talking, with agitation on Harry's part and much flourishing of arms. Anne kept trying to break in but he rattled on and on. Then as we watched Bill leaned in his lips moving and pushed his face very close to Harry. Whatever he said did the trick. Harry pulled his head back and stopped speaking. Bill spoke again and walked away. Harry and Anne exchanged a few more words then they too walked off.

"I feel sure," I said, "that those three are not just casual neighbours. I think they know each other very well."

Jack had been staring out of the window. "And I think you're right Pippa." He turned to Mum. "You said that Harry had been living on another part of the estate. How long ago was it d'you think?"

“Well I’ve been in the close for three years and I recall he and Bill moving in within weeks of each other, this was about a year ago. Then after a few months Anne arrived. I remember thinking how lucky they were that three houses had become vacant. There isn’t a big turnover on this estate.”

“Who had the houses prior to these three?” I felt strangely fidgety.

“If memory serves, there was a very elderly couple in Harry’s and a slightly younger man owned Bill’s. Anne’s house had belonged to a woman who died. Why d’you ask?”

“Because it seems just a little too convenient, don’t you think?” I appealed to them both.

“Yes,” Jack said, “as you say, just a little too convenient.”

Mum looked from me to Jack and back again. “Do I understand you’re saying that the previous owners were forced to move?”

“Maybe. I’d like to meet the management here and find out exactly what happened.” I felt twitchy.

“Well that’s easily arranged. After supper I’ll ring Martin. He looks after the whole estate so he should be able to help if anyone can.”

We all pitched in, and between the three of us we threw together a salad with cheeses and some gorgeous bread.

While Jack and I cleared up, Mum rang Martin. She came off the phone smiling broadly. “He’s a nice guy, you’ll like him, and he said he’ll pop round tomorrow morning. I didn’t tell him much, but he sounded interested in what I did say.”

“Which was what?” I asked.

“That my daughter and son-in-law are investigating some unusual occurrences – nothing more.”

“I would guess you’ve whetted his appetite alright. Everybody loves a mystery.”