


DEAD ON TIME

A pencil sketch on a light-colored background. In the lower-left quadrant, a hand is drawn with fingers slightly spread, reaching upwards. In the upper-right quadrant, a crescent moon is depicted, with a shower of small, diamond-shaped objects falling from it. The overall style is that of a simple line drawing or sketch.

KATIE GRAY

Dead on Time

by

Katie Gray

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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.

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

Chapter One

I knew what kind of day it was going to be, as soon as I opened my eyes.

My eyeballs felt like two lead pellets, plus I had a nasty scratchy feeling in my throat. I couldn't be coming down with something. Could I? We had far too much to do that day. This week as a matter of fact. I rolled onto my side and took a look at the clock. Two minutes to seven. Curses! I felt as though I hadn't been to bed.

Jack was still sound-o. As usual. Perhaps I could just snatch another half an hour, Jack might not hear the alarm ring. Some hopes. He didn't ever not hear the alarm.

Sure enough, at the first peep his eyes opened. "I feel good." This was his first utterance of the day.

I lay quiet, hoping he would assume I was still asleep. No chance.

"Come on, uppsy tuppy, Pipplet."

Through gritted teeth I said, "I've got a sore throat and I think I'm coming..."

"Rubbish. There's nothing wrong with you. You always say you feel under the weather when we've got a new case coming up. Come on sweetie pie, I'll let you have first crack at the shower. Can't say fairer than that can I?"

Dead on Time

I gritted my teeth again but I climbed out of bed. As usual Jack was right, the start of a new case always made me feel yucky. All the same this time, there was something about the client that wasn't quite kosher. Well, I'd just have to hang in there and hope that my instincts were wrong.

Chapter Two

By the time we'd showered and had a bite of breakfast - cereal, scrambled eggs, toast and marmalade for Jack, a Ryvita with low fat spread for me (I was trying to shed a few pounds, again) I felt a little better.

We set off for our office punctually. It's a ten minute drive away and sometimes if the weather's balmy we walk. Jack's even been known to jog.

There's the two of us plus a secretary, and we have a couple of investigators we call on when business is brisk, which lately has been on a regular basis. Today was definitely a day for driving. Dark and cold with a threat of snow the forecasters had said. Typical February.

"We should plan to go off to the Caribbean or somewhere for the winter," I said. "I'm fed up with feeling like an icicle for weeks on end."

"You have got the blues today, haven't you? Jack was fit, chirpy and thoroughly irritating this morning.

"Tell you what, when we've wrapped this case up - shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks - we'll pop over to Paris for a long weekend. How's that?"

Poor love, he was doing his best. I managed a smile.

"Sounds good. Yes, let's do that." All the same, my instincts told me that a couple of weeks was a bit optimistic. This

client was going to be a tricky number. I closed my eyes for a few minutes, picturing the guy's face. Nothing very spectacular there.

He'd be aged around forty-five, hair beginning to recede, and the suspicion of a double chin and thickening waistline. Too many business lunches was my guess. The waistline was disguised a bit by the expensive tailoring, and his shoes could have been handmade by the look of them. All in all a successful character. We'd only talked to him a couple of times, but I just couldn't take to him.

Jack thought I was being picky – perhaps I was, but my waters told me that there was something not quite right.

After the usual shemozzle of finding a parking space, we were ten minutes late.

“Good morning to you.” The warm greeting from our secretary Agnes made me feel a bit better. She'd been our right hand woman for a year.

In our early years as private investigators I did all the donkey work. Phone answering, letter typing, preparing invoices and, of course, making the tea and coffee.

Now, Agnes did all the jobs I hated. Always with a smile, too.

“What's new Aggie?” Jack was the only one brave enough to call her Aggie.

“Mr. Standage, there's been an urgent phone call, from that man Mr. Hunter-Reynolds. He sounded very jumpy. Said he

thought the office opened at nine o'clock, so where were you? Cheeky so and so. I told him you would call him as soon as it was convenient. He didn't care for that. Tough!"

Agnes had her "protect Mr. Standage" face on.

Jack grinned. He loved being protected by Agnes.

"I'll ring the b..... and find out what's so vital," I said. My heart was in my boots, even before I said it.

"Good girl - give him the old razzle dazzle, tell him we'll pop and see him later today, if we can."

Agnes dialled the number, and I picked up with no great show of enthusiasm.

Just let him say one thing out of order, I thought, just one thing.

A voice snapped, "Hunter-Reynolds, who's this?"

"Mrs. Standage here, I understand you rang a little while ago."

"Oh it's you. Let me speak to your husband."

I closed my eyes and bit my tongue, counting to ten as I did so.

"Sorreee, he's busy at the moment," I crossed my fingers. "We'll try and get to you later today. Say three o'clock, shall we?"

I could hear the hiss at the other end. Then, “It better had be three o'clock, I'm a busy man.”

The receiver was banged down.

I blew a raspberry down the speaker. It didn't do any good, but it made me feel better.

Agnes had moved away, grinning, and Jack was laughing.

“That bloody man,” I seldom swear out loud, but I felt it was merited this time. “I do not like him. Do we have to take him on?” I looked beseechingly at my husband.

He pulled himself together. “Yes Pippis, we do. Although you don't much like him, he might be a valuable “in” to some of the big companies. Grin and bear it. Once we know exactly what his problem is, it'll make things easier. Just don't go off the deep end – I know what you're like.”

Agnes reappeared bearing cups of strong coffee. I could've kissed her. Since we'd taken her on board our working life was calmer, and we'd come upon her by chance.

Benny, whom we employed from time to time, had a cousin who did a bit of cleaning for us. Agnes had filled in for her one day and mentioned that she was looking for something to do in the 'office' line, just to earn a “few bob” as she put it, for a holiday. She was a widow in her early fifties, not some flighty thing in her teens or early twenties, still attractive, and always well turned out.

So she came for a week, and never left. A year down the line and we felt she had been with us forever. Alright, she did favour Jack if there were any disagreements about routine, but I hadn't yet met the woman who didn't favour Jack!

Chapter Three

We got down to some of the more boring parts of P.I. work, form filling for example. By lunchtime I could have laid my head on the desk and snored, but it wasn't an option.

Agnes brought in some sandwiches and more coffee, and we girded ourselves up for our meeting with Mr. Hunter-Reynolds.

As we approached his office building, I developed my usual uneasy feeling about him. His manner bordered on the offensive, but it was more than that.

Luckily there was a large car park, and we popped into a space easily. It was our first visit to this big ugly building constructed of ghastly yellow brick. Hmph, I thought, cheap and nasty. However, the inside was anything but. Marble floors, armchair seating, and an enormous glass topped reception desk.

The receptionist matched the décor. A busty blonde, wearing a blouse whose neckline couldn't have plunged any lower without reaching her navel. When she stood up and moved round the desk, I thought Jack's eyes were going to start out of his head. Her skirt barely covered her knickers!

We were escorted to the lift after giving her our names.

"Mr. Hunter-Reynolds is expecting you," she murmured seductively to Jack. I, of course, was less than the dust beneath her feet. No change there, I thought.

The whole second floor was given over to Hunter-Reynolds Inc. I wondered idly what the Inc. was. Jasper Hunter-Reynolds was the name emblazoned in gold on the oak door, and we were greeted by another busty blonde - wearing an outfit as before.

They're obviously a series of cut outs, I thought bitchily, but before I could pursue that idea further, we were ushered into the great man's office.

Jasper Hunter-Reynolds was seated behind a desk so large it could have doubled for the bar at a five star hotel, it seemed to me.

He made no attempt to stand, just waved with a languid hand to two chairs in front of the desk. Needless to say, the chairs were low enough that we had to look up at him.

I could feel my dander getting up at an alarming rate.

"I've called you here today," he said, "because something has happened." We sat, waiting.

"My wife," he went on, "is missing, and I want her found p.d.q."

He paused and sat looking back at us.

Jack cleared his throat. He'll be pulling his lower lip in a minute, I told myself.

"Mr. Hunter-Reynolds, when you first contacted us, you said there was a slightly irritating matter which needed looking

into. Now you're saying your wife's missing, and we're supposed to find her. What's going on?"

It was Hunter-Reynolds turn to clear his throat. "Mr. Standage, there are business negotiations which are delicately poised, people who must be placated, and other items which are not your concern. Suffice to say, the matter of my wife is, naturally, of prime importance. That's all you need to know: nothing else. I'm prepared to pay over and above your normal fee, provided we keep this matter strictly between ourselves, and that you concentrate all your efforts on finding her."

My immediate reaction was to tell him to go away – or words to that effect – but I didn't of course. I sat and waited for Jack's response. I was sure he was going to tell Mr. Hunter-b.... Reynolds the same thing, but to my astonishment he said, "Give us the background, and we'll see what we can do."

I nearly fell off my chair. What had come over Jack. He normally never let anyone dictate to him. Not even me. Well, some of the time anyway.

Something occurred to me.

"Have you spoken to the police?"

Hunter-Reynolds peered at me with disdain.

"There is no need for the police to become involved," he said.

I opened my mouth to speak but Jack said quickly, "Of course not, if you don't think it necessary. I take it you don't suspect anything sinister?"

Hunter-Reynolds curled his lip, and I could have sworn he sniffed.

"My wife has a habit of taking off occasionally, without telling me."

Don't blame her, I thought.

"As a rule, I wouldn't have been bothered."

Stinker, I thought.

"However, this time I have an important project which needs her attention."

In other words she's got to sign some documents, or it all goes pear-shaped, I thought.

Jack was nodding sagely, and making preparations to take notes. Or at least getting out of his briefcase the pad and pen for me to take notes.

"Well, Mr. Hunter-Reynolds, when did you last see your wife?"

I pictured the famous painting, 'When did you last see your father?' and almost laughed out loud, I knew Jack was thinking the same thing. He didn't like Hunter-Reynolds any more than I did.

“It was about a week ago. We had our dinner, then discussed a few things over a drink.”

Had a row, I thought.

“My wife retired to bed, and I had another drink and watched television for a half an hour. I didn't want to wake her, so I slept in the spare room. Next morning, she was gone.”

She'd got good sense, I said to myself.

Jack obviously thought the same thing, because he waffled around for a few minutes, asking had his wife any friends or relatives she might have visited? Or did she have a retreat she could have gone to? Did they own a holiday home?

Hunter-Reynolds waved his hand dismissively.

“I couldn't care less where she goes when she does her disappearing act, she's always back in a day or two. I wouldn't have bothered this time, except for the urgency of my business.”

I hadn't taken any notes, as there weren't any to take. I glanced at Jack, he'd sat back in the chair, arms folded, and tapping his front teeth with his forefinger nail.

To me, his thoughts were writ large on his face. 'What a bastard. Hope she never comes back!'

“Well, Mr. Hunter-Reynolds,” he said, giving the name capital letters. “Well, Mr. Hunter-Reynolds, you haven't given us much to go on, but we'll do our best to discover the whereabouts of your wife, and set your mind at rest.”

The man glared at him.

“Don't you worry about my mind. Just find the woman and get her here. Soonest.”

He stood up, “Speak to my secretary, and tell her how much you want. I'll expect to hear from you by the end of the week.”

We were summarily dismissed.

Neither of us said a word until we'd left the building. I was fit to burst, but Jack leapt in and uttered a few choice oaths, immediately followed by an apology.

“Don't you worry,” I told him. “I could happily add a few to those. If his wife's done a runner for good this time and we find her, I'm going to advise her to divorce him and take him for all he's got.”

“We've got to find her first,” Jack said. “This is going to be a nasty case, I can smell it. Which is why it stinks of course!” He grinned. “Let's go and have drink.”

Chapter Four

One drink stretched to two. Then we decided we might as well eat out. Neither of us felt like cooking.

We had talked about Mrs. H.R. ceaselessly, taking turns to suggest where she might have gone.

I favoured a close friend or friends. Jack thought a relative.

We talked round and round, until finally I said what I knew we were both thinking.

“It's got to be another man.”

I groaned inwardly. With no-one or nothing to go on, we would have to start from scratch. That meant any staff they might have at the house. Any neighbours, or anyone at the office with a loose mouth, and the pig wanted something by the end of the week. No chance.

“I'm going to ring Mr. Hunter-Reynolds,” Jack said. “I'm going to ring him and ask for a list of their friends and a list of any relatives his wife has. If he won't play ball, or says he's too busy, I'll return his cheque, and tell him to find someone else.”

I cheered.

So it was, that, next morning we were ploughing through the list of friends and relatives that H.R. had e-mailed.

Well, I say he had e-mailed, I suspect his hapless secretary had been tasked with that little chore.

There is nothing more jaw-breakingly boring than reading lists of names, when those names mean absolutely nothing to you.

That's not to say that some of the names didn't cause a chuckle or two.

Mrs. Flowerberry, John and Artie Sugworth, and my personal favourite Poppy Cheese.

I dreaded having to ring round the list, which consisted of over twenty names. Luckily Jack volunteered to tackle some, and Agnes said she would be happy to do a half dozen or so.

We settled down using the office phones and Jack's mobile. Far too many were on answering machines, which meant we had to wait for their responses or ring again.

Unfortunately, those who were at home had neither seen nor heard from Mrs. H.R. In fact one woman to whom I spoke said she thought Mrs. H.R. had been living in Spain for a couple of years. I thanked her politely, thinking if this was one of her friends no wonder she'd done a runner.

All in all we must have spent several hours ringing and re-ringing. My mouth felt like the Sahara, and I was sure I'd developed a cauliflower ear. It was all a waste of time too. If anyone knew anything, they were keeping it to themselves.

“Well, that was a complete fiasco,” Jack said. “Not a smell. I've got a nasty feeling that we're going to earn every penny of our fee, and then some!”

I agreed gloomily. Unused to sitting in one position for so long, I felt as though my bum had glued itself to the chair.

“I've got incipient bed sores, except they're chair sores,” I said. “Why don't we call it a day and go home?”

Jack was pulling his lower lip. As he does when he's thinking deeply.

“No,” he said at last. “One of the women I spoke to mentioned a restaurant that the H.R.'s used to visit regularly. Let's sashay along there, grab a bite to eat and chat up the waiting staff.”

I rather cottoned to the idea of a bite to eat in some posh restaurant (it would have to be posh to have H.R. as a customer).

We said 'goodnight' to Agnes and trotted off (or staggered in my case) to find The Discerning Diner – the name for what turned out to be a very average bistro.

After a tasteless risotto, I said to Jack, “I can't imagine that man dining here on a regular basis. It's overpriced, and the menu wouldn't be out of place in a shopping mall cafe.”

Jack, who had chosen lamb shank, said, “You could produce better food than this Pippis.”

I didn't know quite how to take that. I'm not the world's greatest cook I'll admit, but I've been known on occasions, when in the mood, to cook up a storm.

We settled for coffee, rather than one of the uninspiring desserts on the menu.

Our waiter was a young blonde guy, who looked as though he should be on the playing field kicking a ball around.

I put on my best smile and said, "D'you happen to know Mr. and Mrs. Hunter-Reynolds. We understand that they dine here quite often?"

He looked at me blankly. I wondered if he didn't speak much English. Then he said, "I dunno, I only bin 'ere a munff." Having delivered that piece of information he turned and left us.

"That's that then," Jack said.

"We could try the manager," I said. "He's bound to know all the regular customers."

"I guess." Jack was at the lip again.

We weren't hopeful, but we pinned down the manager. He was a cadaverous looking man with a five o'clock shadow. As a restaurant manager he was surely no advertisement for the food.

However, he did know the Hunter-Reynolds'.

"Ho yus," he said. "We 'aven't been favoured with their custom for a while. Is there summat amiss?"

We assured him that to our knowledge all was well.

“It's just that we've lost contact with Mrs. Hunter-Reynolds. Can't find her phone number, and we need to speak to her. You wouldn't happen to have it would you?” I wheedled.

He placed his forefinger on his lips, as though deep in thought.

“I might 'ave it.”

Here it comes, I thought. I wonder how much he'll have a try for, but to my astonishment he said, “It's probably in the office. Hold on a tick.”

Just goes to show, I said to myself, you can never tell. I must stop making assumptions about people.

He was back quite quickly. “It's her mobile, will that do?”

“Admirably. You've been most helpful.” Jack pulled out his wallet. “Please allow me to show my gratitude.”

“Ho no sir, service is included. Thanks all the same.”

Jack settled the bill, and we walked out without saying anything to each other.

“I can't believe what just happened,” I said. Jack shook his head.

“Me neither. Never known a restaurant employee to refuse a tip before. They must be well paid is all I can say.

Perhaps we should think of opening a caff – what d'you think? We could call it Pippy's Pudding Palace.”

I burst out laughing, presently Jack joined me, and giggling like two school kids, we went to the car.

We'd calmed down by the time we got home, so we decided to have a drink then try the mobile phone number.

As we'd half expected we got voicemail.

We rang off without leaving a message and had a think.

“If we leave a message she might not respond. Especially if she thinks HE's employed someone to find her.” I thought that in her shoes, I'd do the same.

“We can't do nothing at all,” Jack said. “We're being paid to find her, and whatever we may think about him he's the one calling the tune.”

“Rats,” I said. “You're quite right of course. Suppose we try again, and I'll leave the message. She may find a woman's voice less threatening.”

So I dialled the number. At the voice mail, I tried to sound as soothing as possible, merely saying that her friends were worried about her, and had asked me to pass on their concerns and please could she ring back. I left my name and number, but didn't mention that we were P.I.'s.

Dead on Time

“We've done all we can for today,” Jack said. “Let's go to bed. We'll have to mount a more intensive search tomorrow, 'cos I've got a feeling that HE's going to be on the phone ceaselessly, wanting updates.”

I sighed. Jack was absolutely right, I could feel it.