

*The Dog Sitter Detective*

*By Antony Johnston*

The Dog Sitter Detective  
The Dog Sitter Detective Takes The Lead



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*For Connor and Rosie, the Handsome Gent and  
the Little Madam, whom we miss every day*

## CHAPTER ONE

‘I’m afraid there’s no money, Gwinny. You’ll have to get a job.’

I stared dumbfounded at Mr Sprocksmith, our family solicitor and the duly appointed executor of my father’s will, displaying his most perfectly sympathetic expression. We’d known one another our whole lives, his father, Sprocksmith senior, having served my own father before him. No doubt he anticipated I’d take this news on the chin, which I like to think is still strong even after all these years, and remain stoic.

That’s probably why he yelped in fright when I leapt out of my seat and slammed my hands on his desk, spilling our cups of tea.

‘A job? *No money?* What the hell are you talking about? Daddy was loaded. You’ve seen our house.’

It was true; Henry Tuffel had made a small fortune in the City. As his daughter and only living relative, I'd expected to inherit quite a sum. But now here was Sprocksmith, telling me there was nothing.

He winced and attempted to wipe up the tea, first with his desk blotter – when that failed, a handkerchief. ‘The house is where your family’s money is tied up, I’m afraid. Your late father liquidated his portfolio after your mother passed, and you’ve both been living off it ever since. His bank savings now amount to . . .’ He threw the blotter and handkerchief in the wastepaper basket, adjusted his glasses and peered at his notes. ‘Four thousand, one hundred and eighty-two pounds.’ He traced a finger down the page. ‘And sixteen pence.’

Sprocksmith handed me a few stapled sheets of paper. *The Matter of the Estate of Henry Wolfram Karl Siegfried Tuffel and its Bequeathal to Guinevere Johanna Frida Anja-Mathilde Tuffel*. It was disappointingly thin. Where was the brick of printed paper I'd been expecting? Was this really it?

I threw the pages down on the desk and paced in frustrated circles around his wood-panelled office, waving my arms in a passable impersonation of a deranged windmill and barely missing several bookshelf ornaments. ‘The old misery say anything to me. He carried on like he was still loaded. For God’s sake, we had dinner at Antoine’s just the other week.’ I turned on my heel and fixed Sprocksmith with a

determined glare. ‘How much is the place worth?’

His chin retreated into his ample neck. ‘Gwinny! Surely you’re not proposing to sell your family home?’

‘In case it escaped your attention, Sprocks, I *am* the family now. No siblings, no husband, and I’m hardly about to get knocked up at my age. How much?’

He floundered. ‘I – I couldn’t possibly say. I don’t think the house has ever been evaluated since Mr Tuffel bought it, after the war. Given its size and location, one would normally assume it could fetch a good price. Chelsea addresses remain desirable.’ He opened his mouth to continue, then clamped it shut.

I wasn’t having that. ‘Out with it. What do you mean, *normally*?’

His tone was reluctant. ‘The last time I visited, it did seem rather . . . in want of attention.’

I wished I could argue, but he was right. The roof was badly in need of repair, the kitchen was stuck in the 1970s (and that was positively futuristic compared to the electrical wiring), none of the doors closed without the aid of a shoulder . . . I’d intended to get it all looked at for years, ever since I moved in following my mother’s death. But caring for my ailing father had turned out to be a full-time job, and one distinctly less fun than the acting career I’d put on hold ten years ago to look after him.

‘It’ll be fine,’ I said, waving away Sprocksmith’s worried expression. ‘Everyone wants to be on *Grand*



*Designs* these days, anyway. All they'll care about is the shell and the location. I'll auction off the contents, flog the place, and move back into my own flat.' His office window overlooked Cavendish Square Gardens, and outside the afternoon was turning dreary and grey. The great British summer.

Sprocksmith rustled papers and cleared his throat. I took the hint. 'What now?'

'I'd need to confirm precise figures, but as I recall the rather large mortgage on your Islington property still has eight years until completion, and the rent you charge your tenants is . . . well, have you ever wondered why it's never been unoccupied?'

The first drops of rain fell, leaving only the hardest dog walkers in the park. 'Sprocks, you could offer Londoners a broom cupboard with no door and there'd be a queue down the street.'

'Precisely my point, and one you'll recall I've made for many years. Your continued refusal to raise the rent has failed to create any appreciable cash buffer. Absent even those small payments, whatever you make from selling the house in Chelsea will be swallowed up by the flat in Islington. It's doubtful you'd even fully settle the mortgage. You'll have lost your largest potential asset for no particular gain.'

I turned from the window, conceding. 'So what do you advise?'

'Live in the house, and undertake repairs by raising

your flat's rent sufficiently to cover those costs, as well as your own standard of living.'

'And what sort of rent increase are we talking about?'

Without hesitation, making me suspicious that Sprocks had already performed this calculation in anticipation, he said, 'Four hundred and twenty per cent.'

'Out of the question,' I choked.

'It would still be at the lower end of comparable properties.'

'No. I couldn't do that to my tenants. There must be another way to square all this.'

He shrugged. 'Then we return to the prospect of gainful employment. Surely you can go back to treading the boards?'

I shot him a withering glare. 'Oh, Sprocks. Darling old Sprocks. If you knew anything about show business, you'd know that roles for sixty-year-old women who haven't stepped in front of either an audience or camera for ten years are rather thin on the ground. People forget about you very easily, and by the time I quit to look after Daddy I'd already been hanging on for years by the skin of my teeth. All I'm good for now is playing the one-line grandmother whom all the wrinkle-free and glossy-haired bright young things cheerfully ignore.' I ran a hand through my own hair, short and white. 'Bloody hell, I'll have to

start dyeing it again. At this rate the only thing I'll be good for is catalogue modelling.'

'I'm sure that's a perfectly respectable line of work,' Sprocksmith squirmed.

I marched over to his desk and held out my hand. 'Be quiet, you chinless wonder, and just tell me where to sign.'