

*The Dog Sitter Detective
Takes the Lead*

By Antony Johnston

The Dog Sitter Detective
The Dog Sitter Detective Takes the Lead



*The Dog Sitter Detective
Takes the Lead*

ANTONY JOHNSTON

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2024.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2024.

Copyright © 2024 by ANTONY JOHNSTON

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover,
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-3025-4

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

By choosing this product, you help take care of the world's forests.
Learn more: www.fsc.org



Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For rescue workers and foster carers everywhere

CHAPTER ONE

I missed the first phone call from Crash Double because I was upstairs trying to dig myself out from under my mother's old clothes before I suffocated under a pile of wool and plastic.

Honestly, Monday mornings.

My phone was on the kitchen table and set to silent because I wasn't expecting anyone to call. With a couple of hours to spare until rehearsal, I was determined to make a start on my mother's seemingly endless wardrobe. She had never been an extravagant figure, and I didn't remember her wearing half of the clothes I now stood facing. But there they were, row upon row of dresses and blouses and skirts and more, gathering dust and packed so tightly they threatened to burst out of the wardrobe in this third-floor spare room. There could have been a passage to Narnia back there and I wouldn't have seen it. After she died, my father could never bring himself to discard her clothes, so he simply shrouded them in plastic. I sometimes thought

he expected me to wear them but that was about as likely as me twirling down the King's Road in a tutu.

So I reached in to remove a dress from the rail, because if I've learnt anything from fixing up the house I inherited it's that you have to start somewhere, and they did. Burst out of the wardrobe, that is. With me underneath.

As I clambered out from under the squeaking plastic, it was becoming clear that sorting out this tailored abundance would take more than a quick hour or two. I abandoned it with a promise to return when I had more time, because today I had an important rehearsal to attend.

Not that all rehearsals aren't important, but this was to be my first major role since coming out of retirement. I'd given up acting to care for my father, and assumed I'd never go back. But when he died after a decade of illness, it turned out he'd burnt through all the money he'd made in the City, and there was nothing left. I'd have to resume working, which was easier said than done for a sixty-year-old woman who hadn't been in front of a camera or audience for ten years. Nevertheless, I was determined to give it a go, and since landing a new agent I'd had several auditions. Mostly for the role of 'quiet grandmother who has one good line if she's lucky', admittedly, but work is work. And now I'd landed a meaty part: Melanie, frustrated daughter of Margory and long-suffering mother to Michelle, in a new play at the Sunrise Theatre called *Mixed Mothers*.

After freshening up and changing into a standard rehearsal outfit of pullover, slacks and flat shoes for comfort, I returned downstairs to gather my things. That's when I finally picked up my phone and saw a call from an unknown number.

I didn't think much of it. There had been a time when my friend Tina was the only person I could reliably expect to call my mobile, while calls on the house phone had invariably been doctors or officials discussing my father's care. Those calls ceased with his death, and I'd considered removing the landline altogether because now everyone lives on their mobiles, don't they? I did, especially as I'd also begun dog-sitting to make ends meet (auditions are all very well, but they don't pay). My number had quickly spread through the dog owners' grapevine and now calls from strangers weren't unusual.

Normally, though, they left a voicemail. No such luck here, so I assumed it was a scammer and tossed my phone, keys and purse in my handbag.

I hadn't yet worked out how to get the towering piles of old *Financial Times* in the hallway to the recycling, so I stepped carefully around them and checked myself in the hallway mirror. Still short and grey, but not in bad shape considering. Then I stepped out onto Smithfield Terrace where a fresh spring breeze blew down the street. I took a sweet breath and smiled, my mind on nothing but making a good impression at rehearsals.

Which is why I jumped several inches in the air when

a familiar sharp voice behind me called out, ‘Guinevere, my dear. Are you well?’

The black-clad Dowager Lady Ragley, my next-door neighbour and stalwart defender of Chelsea house prices, had somehow left her house and approached me without making a sound.

‘Very well, thank you, my lady,’ I said, forcing a smile. ‘In fact, I’m going to first rehearsal for my next role. I’m appearing at the Sunrise, you see.’ It was a small theatre, to be sure, but the Dowager was easily dazzled by celebrity. I lived in vain hope that she might one day be impressed enough by my career to stop badgering me about house repairs.

‘How lovely,’ she said, the information immediately dismissed. Instead, she gestured with a thin, white-cuffed wrist to my house. ‘I wonder if you’ve given any further thought to your façade.’

I fought to stop my eyes rolling and stepped back to take in the frontage. Really, it didn’t need that much work. OK, some of the window frames were a little worse for wear; yes, the guttering and drainpipes needed attention; sure, there was missing ironwork on the basement stair. But it was hardly threatening to collapse onto the pavement.

‘All on my list,’ I reassured her, tapping my head to indicate where said list was stored. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll get to it before—’

A piece of first-floor render chose that moment to succumb to the spring breeze and claim its freedom. In

silence (mine aghast, hers triumphant) we both watched it break away and skitter down the stone, to land on my front step as if mocking not just my words but my very thoughts.

The Dowager faced me with a silent, stony glare. I almost would have preferred her to be smug.

‘I’ll call someone right away,’ I said quickly. Unable to resist, I added, ‘Unless you can recommend a builder personally, of course.’

Her nostrils flared, offended by the suggestion that she might deign to fraternise with tradesmen. She turned on her heel and said, ‘I have full confidence you’ll deal with it, my dear,’ then disappeared inside her house, somehow slamming her door in silence.

Suitably chastened, I pulled out my phone and prepared to call a builder. Except, of course, I knew no more builders than Lady Ragley did. I’d have to seek a recommendation.

Trudging toward Sloane Square Station, the spring breeze seemed to have turned sour.