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Written by

Sally Gardner

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Chapter One

Mrs Fosset was on the first floor landing, duster in hand, when the clock in the hall started to chime.

'Nine o'clock,' she said out loud to the curtains and the chair.

From the window she watched her employer, Sir Walter Cross. He was at the bottom of the garden by the frozen duck pond, feeding his ducks. As always, he was standing by the old weeping willow, which this morning had a roof of frost over its branches. Doughnut, his faithful miniature dachshund, was jumping up and down and barking, the funny little thing.

'You could time an egg by the old boy and it would never be hard boiled,' said Mrs Fosset. 'A man of regular habits.'

There were some strange things about Sir Walter's regular habits. First of all, come rain or shine, he always

took with him a toy umbrella. It was a mystery to Mrs Fosset. It wouldn't keep the rain off a garden gnome. Then there was his strict rule that nobody else should be allowed in the garden while he fed his ducks. After fifteen months of working for the elderly bachelor, Mrs Fosset still had no idea why.

It was as the last chime sounded from the hall clock that something extraordinary happened. Sir Walter Cross appeared to rise out of his walking boots, purple smoke curdling from his red-socked feet. He rose into the air, slowly at first, and then seemed to perform the impossible magic trick of hovering less than a metre above the ground. Faithful Doughnut barked furiously and jumped up until he managed to attach his gnashers to the bottom of Sir Walter's trouser leg. Pulling with all his might, he tried to bring his owner back down to earth. At first it looked as if the brave hound might succeed, but firecrackers burst from Sir Walter's feet and both dog and master whooshed skywards, Doughnut clinging on for dear life.

Mrs Fosset was frozen to the spot, helpless, as she saw this terrible scene unfolding before her eyes. Not being

a woman of great imagination, what she was witnessing seemed unbelievable. She clutched her feather duster to her bosom, her knees weak.

Things outside the window took a turn for the worse. Sir Walter's trouser leg ripped and Doughnut fell, at first with startling speed, back down to earth. But just before he hit the ground he stopped completely. To Mrs Fosset's eye, it looked as if someone had plucked Doughnut out of the air and set him down gently on the frozen grass. He was still barking wildly as Sir Walter continued upwards, higher than the house, higher than the trees. He was shouting, but what he was shouting Mrs Fosset couldn't hear through the double-glazed window.

Never in her whole life had the housekeeper seen such a sight. Sir Walter was now as high as the church steeple, suspended in mid-air as if standing on an invisible platform in the sky. Then, to her horror, Sir Walter lost his balance. Trailing rainbow colours behind him, he fell as a stone might. No stopping for him, no; he fell splat to the ground as a dazzling display of stars whizzed into the cold, grey morning sky.

In a terrible state, Mrs Fosset called for an ambulance and the police while the young gardener, Derek Lowe, who was in the kitchen, ran to the bottom of the garden. He found Sir Walter at the edge of the duck pond, neatly laid out, his boots facing the water, his stockinged feet pointing skywards. He was dead. Doughnut had vanished.

Chapter Two

Detective James Cardwell arrived at Sir Walter Cross's Georgian mansion to find that Sergeant Litton of the Podgy Bottom police had got there well before him. Detective Cardwell had a low opinion of the potato-faced sergeant.

'I have this under control,' said Sergeant Litton, stamping his feet on the ground and rubbing his hands together as watery flakes of snow began to fall. 'Blooming cold. The sooner we wrap this up the better.'

'How did he die?' asked Detective Cardwell.

'It appears the gentleman just dropped down dead,' replied Sergeant Litton.

'Did anyone see anything?' asked Detective Cardwell.

'There are no suspicious circumstances, I can assure you of that,' said Sergeant Litton.

‘What does his housekeeper – Mrs Fosset – say?’

‘Some rubbish about Sir Walter whizzing up into the air with his dog attached to his trouser leg. The woman is bonkers. You can’t believe a word she says. I mean no one can just whiz up into the air. It’s not possible.’

James Cardwell bent down and carefully examined the body.

‘Where’s the dog now?’ he asked.

‘Ran away,’ said the sergeant. ‘Look, there’s no more to this than meets the eye.’ He laughed. ‘The only thing I’d like to know is which horse he’d backed for the two-thirty at Cheltenham.’

‘You like a flutter on the horses?’ asked Detective Cardwell.

‘No, I’m not a gambling man,’ said the sergeant, ‘but it wouldn’t be betting, would it? I’d be backing a sure-fire winner. Sir Walter Cross was famous for his golden knack of picking a winner every time.’

Detective Cardwell said nothing. He stood for a few minutes, looking out at the duck house, before slowly walking all the way round the pond. He felt his fairy

wings begin to flutter under his shirt. After waiting a hundred years to have his wings returned to him, it was a sensation that he was becoming used to again. Whenever things weren't right, they began to quiver – and there was something decidedly wrong with this case. Fortunately it was cold enough that he needed to wear a heavy overcoat. It would be a problem to explain flapping wings to the sergeant. Or, for that matter, to anyone in the police force. He was near a clump of bullrushes when he bumped into the gardener.

'Strange business,' said Derek Lowe.

'Indeed,' said Detective Cardwell. 'Did you see what happened?'

'No, I didn't. Mrs Fosset did though and she isn't a woman who goes about inventing nonsense. She said the old boy went up like a rocket and came down like a rock.'

'So I've heard,' said Detective Cardwell. 'You were the first to see the body?'

'Yes – and I could see Sir Walter's footprints,' said the gardener. 'They were clearly outlined in the frost, and so

were Doughnut's. Sir Walter wouldn't allow anyone into the garden while he fed his ducks. But I can't explain this: next to where he lay was a trail of small footprints which led to the willow tree and no farther. I mean, people don't just pop up and vanish again, do they?'

James Cardwell's wings were now definitely twitching.

'Thank you,' he said. 'You have been most helpful. Will you tell Mrs Fosset I would like to see her?'

Fairy meddling, thought Detective Cardwell as he rejoined Sergeant Litton. This case has all the hallmarks of fairy meddling.