

# KID ALONE

A GARVIE SMITH MYSTERY



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# 1

The others were already there, waiting in the darkness, and Garvie Smith went through the park gate and across the slippery grass toward them. Haphazardly arranged on the tiny swings and miniature merry-go-round of the Old Ditch Road kiddies' playground, dim, low-slung, and damp, Smudge, Felix, Dani, and Tiger raised hands and touched knuckles with him, one by one, and he settled down among them, yawning.

Smudge looked at him. "What you got for us, big shot?"

Garvie shook his head.

"What, not even the Rizlas?"

"Next time."

"Next time! Might not be a next time, mate. The world's a strange and uncertain place. Who knows what's going to happen in the future?"

Garvie looked at him; yawned again. "We all know, Smudge. Nothing, that's what. And, if we're not that lucky, maybe a bit less than nothing."

He took out his Benson & Hedges and offered them around, and Smudge passed him the almost-empty half bottle of Glen's cheapest

and the sherbet lemons, and they sat there smoking, drinking, sucking sweets, and grumbling.

Ten o'clock on a Friday evening in Five Mile. The wind getting up, drizzle, a few smokes, and a bit of banter before the cop car came by to chuck them off.

Half an hour passed.

Smudge had another go. "Come on, Garv, you haven't said hardly nothing since you got here. Anyone'd think you were fretting about your exams."

No one who knew anything about him would think Garvie was fretting about his exams; he was not only the boredest but also the laziest boy in the history of Marsh Academy, perhaps of the whole city, or even the whole history of boys anywhere. Slacker Smith, all brain and no energy, the despair of his school. Black-haired, blue-eyed, and sixteen years old, sloppy in slouch jeans, hooded sweatshirt, and broken-down high-tops, he sat on his stamped-metal circus horse with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his beautiful mouth, rocking gently, breathing out smoke, gazing in quiet boredom across the black grass toward the city lights downtown. The truth was, exams didn't bother him. What bothered him was the people who talked about them. His mother, for instance. Uncle Len. Miss Perkins, Marsh Academy's principal enforcer. A few weeks earlier, as a result of some bother with the police, during which, through no fault of his own, he'd missed a good deal of schoolwork, he'd been officially assured that his exams would be deferred—only for the school to decide a few days later that he'd be taking them anyway. He would take his exams

as scheduled, Miss Perkins had told him, he would fulfill his potential as required, he would at long last show the world the abilities of a boy with a certified record IQ and famous photographic memory. Only he wouldn't. He didn't like Miss Perkins. He didn't like the world, either, and he wasn't going to do anything for it. What had it ever done for him?

“So what's your problem?” Smudge asked.

“Nothing,” Garvie said. “Or a bit less.”

A disturbance came from down Old Ditch Road, a bass bumping noise shaking the ground. After a moment a car appeared alongside the hedge that divided the park from the street and came to a throbbing, brightly lit standstill by the park gate a few meters away, a tall black Cadillac Escalade Platinum with limo tint windows and Lexani wheels in electric egg-yolk yellow, LED headlights pulsing, colored light panels racing like lasers along the roof. It fumed with music for twenty, thirty beats and suddenly fell silent. Transfixed, the boys stared at it as the nearside back window slid down with a thin whine and a face appeared, grinning and blinking. Smudge let out a small burp of fear.

The face looked at Garvie.

“Got a light for me, boy?” A hoarse, whispery voice.

Garvie looked back, puffing smoke, thinking about it. “No,” he said at last.

Smudge stifled a moan.

The back door swung open and a short, skinny guy stepped out and stood there. He was wearing a black leather jacket over an outside

retro tracksuit in turquoise and a Dirty Rat fitted hat, and his glasses flashed in the streetlight as his head bobbed, goldfish eyes blinking big and slow. He was no longer grinning.

“You got a light,” he said, nodding toward Garvie’s cigarette.

Garvie took a long drag on his Benson & Hedges, dropped it, and ground it out with the heel of his shoe.

“No, I haven’t,” he said.

Smudge groped hastily in his pocket for matches and made a few faltering squeaks, but fell silent as more car doors opened and two men in matching vests got out. They were big men, blank-faced behind shades, and they stood in the road as if waiting for instructions.

Blinkie grinned again. He was a fool. Everything about him was idiotic: his gangster outfit, monster chains, gold grills, those enormous, inhuman eyes. His teeth were too big for his mouth. He was the only white man in Five Mile with cornrows. But he was a fool no one laughed at. People were very careful around Blinkie. He was what was commonly known as “a bit psycho.”

The street was quiet for a moment, no sound but a car on the other side of the park. Blinkie looked at his watch.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed, boy?” he said to Garvie.

“Shouldn’t you be in prison?” Garvie said.

Smudge flinched so hard he almost fell off the swings, and Blinkie stopped grinning. He took a step toward Garvie, and one of the men behind him leaned forward and muttered something, and he hesitated and glanced down the road.

He looked back at Garvie. “Know what I like?” he whispered.

Garvie shrugged. "I'm guessing it's not normal clothes. Or mirrors."

"Fun," Blinkie said. "So I'll be seeing you."

He slipped back into the car, the door closed with a satisfyingly shushy clunk, the music pumped out again, and the rocking car slid away down Old Ditch Road like a fairground ride.

Garvie got to his feet and sauntered toward the gate after it, and Smudge and Felix called after him, anxious as baby birds.

"What you doing now? Are you insane? What if he comes back?"

"Relax. He's not coming back."

"How do you know?"

Garvie reached the gate as the squad car drew up with its lights turned down low, and he went up to it and tapped on the window.

The window came down and a policeman in a bulletproof turban looked out, and Garvie looked at him in surprise for a moment.

"You've just missed them," he said. "They went that way," he added.

Detective Inspector Singh made no reaction. He said, "What are you and your friends doing here?"

Garvie said, "What are *you* doing here, on the night shift? It's usually Constable Jones here who comes along to move us on."

Jones, the driver, scowled, but Singh simply asked again, "What are you doing in the park?"

"Swings, mainly. Sometimes we go on the merry-go-round."

Singh waited patiently.

"Okay, you've got me," Garvie said. "Smoking, drinking, occasionally doing drugs." He stretched his arms out wide. "Do you want to search me?"