

A GARVIE SMITH MYSTERY

HEY, SHERLOCK!

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1

It was a wet and windy August night. A storm was coming. Rain from the east began to fall in ragged bursts out of swirling cloud. There was a low groan of thunder, a sudden fracture of lightning, and the deserted downtown streets jumped with water. The long, low suburbs of Five Mile and Limekilns blurred under the downpour.

Up at Froggett, trees in the landscaped gardens of the elegant villas swung sluggishly in the wind. Froggett was the most expensive postcode in the city, a leafy enclave of tasteful old homes surrounded by woodland. None of the houses had numbers. They had names – ‘Meadowsweet’, ‘The Rectory’, ‘Field View’. It gave them personalities, standing at ease with a sort of plush modesty behind pink brick walls or copper beech hedges in grounds laid out with ponds and lawns, tennis courts and terraces. Now, in the storm, rain-mist boiled in their immaculate gardens, their ponds crackled and fizzed, their exotic trees clashed their boughs.

It was midnight. In the living room of one of these houses – ‘Four Winds’, a late Victorian villa in biscuit-coloured brick, all gables and chimneys –

Dr Roecastle sat alone working on her notes. She was a senior surgeon at City Hospital, a slender middle-aged woman with dark hair in a feminine cut and a narrow face that never relaxed. From time to time she sipped herbal tea with a look of careful concentration.

The living room was a direct expression of her personal style. It was decorated entirely in monochrome: a white rug on the black japanned floor, a glossy black table on the rug, two sharply geometrical black-and-white sofas and a number of chairs receding towards the black glazed fireplace in the end wall, above which hung a huge silkscreen print of a black triangle against a brilliant white background.

Hearing thunder, she glanced towards the streaming window as it flared suddenly with the shocking exposure of lightning. Irritated, she looked at her watch. Eleven minutes past twelve. At that moment, cocking her head, she picked out a different sound among the clatter of the storm – the muted opening and closing of the front door, and she pushed aside her laptop and sat there, waiting severely.

Her sixteen-year-old daughter appeared, advanced slowly into the room, head down, and stood there, dripping.

‘I don’t call this ten o’clock at the latest,’ her mother said after a moment. ‘Do you?’

Amy Roecastle said nothing. She had a beautiful, unruly face – blue eyes, heavy eyebrows, a wide,

crisp mouth – and she stood there, soaked, in black bondage trousers, German-issue army jacket and drenched woollen hat pulled down over her forehead, staring at the floor, saying nothing while her mother talked. She was very still. Occasionally she trembled. Water dripped from her sleeves onto the white rug.

‘We had an agreement,’ her mother said. ‘Which you have broken. What’s the reason?’

Her daughter remained silent. Blank-faced.

‘There is no reason, of course,’ Dr Roecastle said, watching Amy carefully. ‘I don’t know why I ask. Thoughtlessness is the reason. Selfishness. A complete disregard for anyone else.’ She thought she saw her daughter briefly smile. ‘Are you drunk?’ she asked sharply.

Still Amy said nothing. Rain drummed against the windows, but the silence inside the room was very silent.

Her mother got to her feet. ‘I’m going into the kitchen to get another cup of tea. You’re going to wait here and think about your behaviour. And when you’re ready, you’re going to come in and explain yourself to me.’

Amy spoke. ‘All right,’ she said.

Dr Roecastle scrutinized her daughter for a moment, then turned and left the room. On her way, she stopped at the front door to put on the night-time alarm, then went on to the kitchen.

There was a bang of thunder and almost

immediately another flare of lightning, and for a moment she thought she heard a cry somewhere, and muffled shouting, then a gust of rain clattered against the windows and the sound was lost. Sitting at the kitchen table, she pulled her collar round her throat and shivered.

She made her tea. Several minutes passed.

‘I’m waiting,’ she called out.

Waiting, she brooded. All summer Amy’s behaviour had been intolerable and, reviewing the situation now, she felt all the force of righteous anger inside her. Frowning as she picked a speck off the rim of her cup, she rehearsed what she was going to say.

After a while, she called out again, more loudly, ‘Amy! I said I’m waiting!’

At last, exasperated, she got up and went back into the living room.

Her daughter was no longer there. Just a wet patch on the white rug where she had been standing.

Dr Roecastle strode out of the room into the hall and stood at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Amy!’

No answer. Only the rain trying to crack the windowpanes.

‘Amy!’ she shouted once more. ‘I’m not chasing after you. I can wait as long as necessary. You *will* come down and explain yourself.’

A long rip of thunder reverberated round the house, and in the quiet aftermath Dr Roecastle heard

the wind-bent trees shudder and moan. There was no sound anywhere in the house, but again she thought she heard a cry outside, immediately swept away by the crashing of the storm. She looked at her watch. It was half past twelve.

She went back into the living room and sat down at her laptop to wait.

2

Branches whipped Amy's face, and she slipped and fell with a cry, and got up wet, and staggered on again through the roaring trees. Rain blinded her. She ducked and skidded along the path as the storm boomed and crashed around her like a surging sea.

From time to time she paused, panting, to look behind her anxiously, wiping her eyes with a muddy sleeve and squinting through the darkness, before hurrying on again, drenched and shivering. Twice she cried out at shadows flung towards her by the wind. Thunder made a noise like cliff faces breaking apart; she fell again, hauled herself up and stumbled on.

She was already deep in the woods. In the heaving darkness she stopped and looked behind her. Her house was lost to view; there was nothing but the chaotic darkness of the wood. A sudden noise nearby made her spin round, looking frantically from side to side. Through the trees ahead there was a gap of moonlight flickering with rain, and she shielded her eyes and peered towards it. There was something there. What was it? Was it . . . a van? A van parked in the middle of the wood?

She stood in the shadows, dripping. Then one of the shadows lurched forward and grabbed hold of her.