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opening extract from

The Power of Five: Book 2

Evil Star

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The old man's eyes burned red, reflecting the last flames of the fire. The sun had already begun to set and the shadows were closing in. Far away, a huge bird – a condor – wheeled around in a lazy circle before plunging back down to earth. Then everything was still. The night was just a breath away.

"He will come," the old man said. He spoke in a strange language, and one known to very few people in the world. "We have no need to send for him. He will come anyway."

He got to his feet, supporting himself on a walking-stick carved from the branch of a tree, and made his way to the edge of the stone terrace where he had been sitting. From here he could look down into a canyon that seemed to fall away for ever, a fault line in the planet that had occurred perhaps a million years ago. For a time he was silent. There were a dozen men behind him, waiting for him to speak. None of them moved. Not one of them dared interrupt him while he stood there deep in thought.

At last he turned back.

"The boy is on the other side of the world," he said. "He lives in England."

One of the men stirred uneasily. He knew it was wrong to ask questions but he couldn't stop himself. "Are we just going to wait for him?" he demanded. "We have so little time. And even if he does come, how can he *help us? A child!"*

"You don't understand, Atoc," the old man replied. If he was angry, he didn't show it. He knew that Atoc was only twenty years old, barely more than a child himself, at least in his old mind. "The boy has power. He still has no idea who he is or how strong he has become. He will come here and he will arrive in time. His power will bring him to us."

"Who is this boy?" someone else asked.

The old man looked again at the sun. It seemed to be sitting, perfectly balanced, on the highest mountain peak. The mountain was called Mandango ... the Sleeping God.

"His name is Matthew Freeman," he said. "He is the first of the Five."

BIG WHEEL

There was something wrong about the house in Eastfield Terrace. Something unpleasant.

All the houses in the street were more or less identical: red-brick, Victorian, with two bedrooms on the first floor and a bay window on either the left or the right of the front door. Some had satellite dishes. Some had window boxes filled with brightly coloured flowers. But looking down from the top of the hill at the terrace curving round St Patrick's church on its way to the Esso garage and All-Nite store, one house stood out immediately. Number twenty-seven no longer belonged there. It was as if it had caught some sort of disease and needed to be taken away.

The front garden was full of junk, and as usual the wheelie bin beside the gate was overflowing, surrounded by black garbage bags that the owners had been unable to stuff inside. This wasn't uncommon in Eastfield Terrace. Nor was it particularly strange that the curtains were permanently drawn across the front windows and, as far as anyone could tell, the lights were never turned on. But the house smelled. For weeks now there had been a rotten, sewagey smell that had seemed at

first to be coming from a blocked pipe but that had rapidly got worse until people had begun to cross the street to avoid it. And whatever was causing it seemed to be affecting the entire place. The grass on the front lawn was beginning to die. The flowers had wilted and then been choked up by weeds. The colour seemed to be draining out of the very bricks.

The neighbours had tried to complain. They had knocked on the front door, but nobody had come. They had telephoned, but nobody had answered. Finally, they had called the borough council at the Ipswich Civic Centre but of course it would be weeks before any action was taken. The house wasn't empty. That much they knew. They had occasionally seen the owner, Gwenda Davis, pacing back and forth behind the net curtains. Once – more than a week ago – she had been seen scurrying home from the shops. And there was one other piece of evidence that there was still life at number twenty-seven: every evening the television was turned on.

Gwenda Davis was well known in the street.

She had lived there for much of her adult life, first on her own and then with her partner, Brian Conran, who worked occasionally as a milkman. But what had really set the neighbours talking was the time, six years ago, when she had inexplicably adopted an eight-year-old boy and brought him home to live with her. Everyone agreed that she and Brian were not exactly the ideal parents. He drank. The two of them argued. And according to local gossip, they hardly knew the boy, whose own parents had died in a car accident.

So nobody was very surprised when the whole thing went wrong. It wasn't really the boy's fault. Matthew Freeman had been a nice enough child – everyone agreed – but almost from the moment he arrived he had been in trouble. He had started missing school. He'd been hanging out with the wrong company. He became known for a whole range of petty crimes, and inevitably the police had been involved. And finally there had been that robbery at a local warehouse, just round the corner from Ipswich station. A security guard had nearly died and Matthew had been dragged out with blood on his hands. After that, he'd been sent away on some sort of fostering programme. He had a new mother, somewhere in Yorkshire. And good riddance to bad rubbish. That was the general view.

All this had happened about three months ago. Since then, Gwenda had gradually disappeared from sight. And as for Brian, no one had seen him for weeks. The house had become more and more neglected. Everyone agreed that soon something would have to be done.

Now it was half past seven one evening in the first week of June. The days were stretching out, holding on for as long as they could. The people of Eastfield Terrace were hot and tired. Tempers were getting short. And the smell was as bad as ever.

Gwenda was in the kitchen, making supper for herself. She had never been a very attractive woman, small and dowdy with dull eyes and pinched lips that never smiled. But in the weeks since Matt's departure, she had rapidly declined. Her

hair was unbrushed and wild. She was wearing a flowery dress and a cardigan which, like her, hadn't been washed for some time and hung off her, almost shapeless. She had developed a nervous twitch, constantly rubbing her arms as if she was cold or perhaps afraid of something.

"Do you want anything?" she called out in a thin, high-pitched voice.

Brian was waiting for her in the sitting room but she knew he wouldn't eat anything. She had preferred it when he'd had his job down at the milk depot, but he'd been sacked after getting into a fight with one of the managers. That had happened just after Matt had been sent away. Now Brian had lost his appetite too.

Gwenda looked at her watch. It was almost time for *Big Wheel*, her favourite television programme of the week. In fact, thanks to satellite, she could see *Big Wheel* every night. But Thursdays were special. On Thursday there was a brand new programme – not a repeat.

Gwenda was addicted to *Big Wheel*. She loved the bright lights of the studio, the mystery prizes, the contestants who might win a million pounds if they got enough questions right and dared to spin the wheel. Best of all, she loved the presenter – Rex McKenna – with his permanent suntan, his jokes, his perfect white smile. Rex was about fifty years old but his hair was still jet black, his eyes glimmered and there was a spring in his step that made him seem much younger. He had been on the show for as long as Gwenda could remember, and

although he hosted two other quiz programmes as well as a dancing competition on the BBC, it was in *Big Wheel* that Gwenda liked him best.

"Is it on yet?" she called from the kitchen.

There was no reply from Brian. He hadn't been talking very much lately, either.

She reached into a cupboard and took out a tin of beans. It wasn't exactly what you'd call a feast but it had been a while since either of them had earned any money and she was beginning to feel the pinch. She looked around the kitchen for a clean plate but there weren't any. Every surface was covered with dirty crockery, a tower of soiled plates and bowls rose out of the sink. Gwenda decided she would eat the beans out of the tin. She plunged her hand into the brown, filthy water and somehow managed to find a fork. She wiped off some of the grease on her dress and hurried from the room.

The lights were out in the sitting room but the glow of the television was enough to show the way. It also showed the mess that the room had become. There were old newspapers scattered across the carpet, overflowing ashtrays, more dirty plates, old socks and underpants. Brian was sitting on a sofa that had looked ugly and second hand the moment it had left the shop. There was a nasty stain on the nylon cover. Ignoring it, Gwenda sat down next to him.

The smell, which had been bad throughout the house, was worse in here. Gwenda ignored that too.

It seemed to her that everything had gone wrong since

Matt had left. She didn't quite know why. It wasn't as if she had actually liked him. On the contrary, she had always known there was something weird about the boy. Hadn't he dreamt that his mother and father were going to die the night before the accident actually happened? She had only taken him in because Brian had persuaded her – and of course, he'd only wanted to get his hands on the money that Matt's parents had left their son. The trouble was, the money had gone all too quickly. And then Matt had gone too, taken away by the police as a juvenile delinquent, and all she'd been left with was the blame.

It wasn't her fault. She'd looked after him. She'd never forget the way the police looked at her, as if she was the one who'd committed the crime. She wished now that Matt had never come into her life. Everything had gone wrong because of Matt.

"And now, on ITV, it's time once again to take your chances and spin ... the Big Wheel!"

Gwenda settled back as the *Big Wheel* theme tune began. Fifty-pound notes twisted and spun across the screen. The audience applauded. And there was Rex McKenna walking down the flashing staircase with a pretty girl holding onto each arm. He was dressed in a bright, sequinned jacket, waving and smiling, happy as always to be back.

"Good evening, everyone!" he called out. "Who knows who's going to win big-time tonight?" He paused and winked straight at the camera. "Only the wheel knows!"

The audience went wild as if they were hearing the words

for the first time. But of course Rex always began the show the same way. "Only the wheel knows!" was his catch phrase, although Gwenda wasn't quite sure if it was true. The wheel was just a big piece of wood and plastic. How could it know anything?

Rex came to a halt and the applause died down. Gwenda was staring at the screen in a kind of trance. She had already forgotten her baked beans. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered how it was that the television still worked when the electricity in the house had been turned off two weeks ago because she hadn't paid the bill. But the back of her mind was a very long way away and it didn't really matter. It was a blessing. How would she get through the nights without *Big Wheel*?

"Welcome to another show where the spin of the wheel could mean a million pounds in your pocket or a return ticket home with absolutely nothing!" Rex began. "And what a busy week I've had. My wife woke me up at six o'clock yesterday morning to remind me to put the alarm on. The alarm went off at seven and it still hasn't come back!"

The audience roared with laughter. Gwenda laughed too.

"But we've got a great show for you tonight. And in a minute we're going to meet the three lucky contestants who are competing for tonight's big prizes. But remember. If you want to get your hands on a million quid, what do you have to do?"

"You have to spin to win!" the audience yelled.

Brian said nothing. It was beginning to annoy Gwenda, the way he just sat there.

"But before we can get started," Rex went on, "I want to have a quick word with a very special lady, a real favourite of mine..." He stepped closer to the camera and, as his face filled the screen, it seemed to Gwenda that he was looking directly at her.

"Hello, Gwenda," he said.

"Hello, Rex," Gwenda whispered. It was difficult for her to believe that he was actually talking to her. It always was.

"And how are you tonight, my love?"

"I'm all right..." She bit her lip and folded her hands in her lap.

"Well, listen, my darling. I wonder if you've given any more thought to what we talked about. Matt Freeman. That gutter-snipe. That little creep. Have you decided what you're going to do about him?"

Rex McKenna had started talking to Gwenda two months ago. At the beginning, it had puzzled Gwenda. How could he interrupt the show (watched by ten million people) just to speak to her? Somehow he even managed to do it in the repeats, and that couldn't be possible because some of them had been recorded years ago. At first it had worried her. When she'd told Brian about it, he'd laughed in her face and said she was going mad. Well, Rex had soon put her straight about Brian. And now she didn't worry about it any more. It was bizarre but it was happening and the truth was, she was flat-

tered. She adored Rex and it seemed he was equally fond of her.

"Matt Freeman made a fool of you," Rex went on. "He came into your house and he ruined your relationship with Brian and then the boy got into trouble and everybody said it was your fault. And now look at you! No money. No job. You're a mess, Gwenda..."

"It's not my fault," Gwenda muttered.

"I know it's not your fault, old love," Rex replied. For a moment the camera cut away and Gwenda could see the studio audience getting restless, waiting for the show to begin. "You looked after that boy. You treated him like a son. But he's pushed off without so much as a by-your-leave. No gratitude, of course. Kids these days! He's cock of the walk now and you should hear the things he says about you! I've been thinking about it and I have to say ... I believe the boy ought to be punished."

"Punished..." Gwenda muttered the word with a sense of dread.

"Just like you punished Brian for being so rude to you." Rex shook his head. Maybe it was a trick of the studio lighting but he seemed almost to be reaching out of the television set as if he was about to climb into the room. "The fact of the matter is that Matt is a very nasty piece of work," he said. "Everywhere he goes, he causes trouble. You remember what happened to his parents."

"They died."

"It was his fault. He could have saved them. And there are

other things you don't know about. He upset some very good friends of mine recently. In fact he more than upset them. He killed them. Can you believe that? He killed all of them. If you ask me, there's no question about it. He needs to be punished very severely indeed."

"I don't know where he is," Gwenda said.

"I can tell you that. He goes to a school called Forrest Hill. It's in Yorkshire, just outside York. That's not so far away."

"What do you want me to do?" Gwenda asked. Her mouth was dry. The tin of beans had tilted forward in her hands and cold tomato sauce was dripping into her lap.

"You like me, don't you, Gwenda?" The television presenter gave her one of his special smiles. There were little wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. "You want to help me. You know what has to be done."

Gwenda nodded. For some reason she had begun to cry. She wondered if this would be the last time Rex McKenna would talk to her. She would go to York and she wouldn't come back.

"You go there on the train and you find him and you make sure that he never hurts anyone again. You owe it to yourself. You owe it to everyone. What do you say?"

Gwenda couldn't speak. She nodded a second time. The tears were flowing faster.

Rex backed away. "Ladies and gentlemen, let's hear it for Gwenda Davis. She's a lovely lady and she deserves a big round of applause."

The audience agreed. They clapped and cheered until Gwenda left the room and went upstairs.

Brian remained where he was, sitting on the sofa, his legs slightly apart, his mouth hanging open. He had been like that ever since Gwenda had stuck the kitchen knife into his chest. Brian had laughed at her. He had said she was mad. She'd had to teach him a lesson that he wouldn't forget. Rex had told her to do that too.

A few minutes later, Gwenda left the house. She'd meant to pack, but in the end she hadn't been able to find anything worth taking apart from the axe that she used to chop wood. She'd slipped that into the bag that dangled from her arm.

Gwenda locked the door behind her and walked away. She knew exactly where she was heading: Forrest Hill, a school in Yorkshire. She was going to see her nephew, Matt Freeman, again.

He would certainly be surprised.