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Opening extract from

The Power of Five: Raven's Gate

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THE WAREHOUSE

Matt Freeman knew he was making a mistake.

He was sitting on a low wall outside Ipswich station, wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt, shapeless, faded jeans, and trainers with frayed laces. It was six o'clock in the evening and the London train had just pulled in. Behind him, commuters were fighting their way out of the station. The concourse was a tangle of cars, taxis and pedestrians, all of them trying to find their way home. A traffic light blinked from red to green but nothing moved. Somebody leant on their horn and the noise blared out, cutting through the damp evening air. Matt heard it and looked up briefly. But the crowd meant nothing to him. He wasn't part of it. He never had been – and he sometimes thought he never would be.

Two men carrying umbrellas walked past and glanced at him disapprovingly. They probably thought he was up to no good. The way he was sitting – hunched forward with his knees apart – made him look somehow dangerous, and older than fourteen. He had broad shoulders, a well-developed, muscular body and bright blue, intelligent eyes. His hair was

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black, cut very short. Give him another five years and he could be a footballer or a model – or, like plenty of others, both.

His first name was Matthew but he always called himself Matt. As the troubles had begun to pile up in his life, he had used his surname less and less until it was no longer a part of him. Freeman was the name on the school register and on the truancy list, and it was a name well known to the local social services. But Matthew never wrote it down and seldom spoke it. "Matt" was enough. The name suited him. After all, for as long as he could remember, people had been walking all over him.

He watched the two men with umbrellas cross the bridge and disappear in the direction of the city centre. Matt hadn't been born in Ipswich. He had been brought here and he hated everything about the place. For a start, it wasn't a city. It was too small. But it had none of the charm of a village or a market town. It was really just an oversized shopping centre with the same shops and supermarkets that you saw everywhere else. You could swim in the Crown Pools or you could see movies at the multiplex – or, if you could afford it, there was an artificial ski slope and go-karting. But that was about it. It didn't even have a decent football team.

Matt had just three pounds in his pocket, saved up from his newspaper round. There was another twenty pounds at home, hidden in a box under his bed. He needed money for the same reason as every other teenager in Ipswich. It wasn't just because his trainers were falling apart and the games on

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his XBox were six months out of date. Money was power. Money was independence. He didn't have any and he was here tonight because he wanted some.

But already he was wishing he hadn't come. It was wrong. It was stupid. Why had he ever agreed?

He glanced at his watch. Ten past six. They had arranged to meet at a quarter to. Well, that was excuse enough. He swung himself off the wall and headed across the station front. But he hadn't taken more than a couple of steps before another, older boy appeared out of nowhere, blocking his path.

"You off then, Matt?" the boy asked.

"I thought you weren't coming," Matt said.

"Oh yes? And why did you think that?"

Because you're twenty-five minutes late. Because I'm cold. Because you're about as reliable as a local bus. That was what Matt wanted to say. But the words didn't come. He just shrugged.

The other boy smiled. His name was Kelvin and he was seventeen, tall and scrawny with fair hair, pale skin and acne. He was dressed expensively in designer jeans and a soft leather jacket. Even when he had been at school, Kelvin had always had the best gear.

"I got held up," he said.

Matt said nothing.

"You haven't had second thoughts, have you?"

"No."

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"You've got nothing to worry about, Matt, mate. It's going to be easy. Charlie told me…"

Charlie was Kelvin's older brother. Matt had never met him, which wasn't surprising. Charlie was in prison, in a young offenders' institution just outside Manchester. Kelvin didn't often talk about him. But it was Charlie who had first heard about the warehouse.

It was fifteen minutes from the station, in an industrial zone. A warehouse stacked with CDs, video games and DVDs. Amazingly, it had no alarm systems and only one security guard, a retired policeman who was half-asleep most of the time, with his feet up and his head buried in a newspaper. Charlie knew all this because a friend of his had been in to do some electrical work. According to Charlie, you could break in with a bent paper clip and you could probably walk out with a couple of hundred quid's worth of equipment. It was easy, just waiting to be taken.

That was why the two of them had arranged to meet here. Matt had agreed to the idea when they were talking about it, but half of him had thought Kelvin wasn't being serious. The two of them had done plenty of things together. Under Kelvin's guidance, they'd stolen stuff from supermarkets, and once they'd driven off in someone's car. But Matt knew this was much worse. This was serious. It was breaking and entering. Burglary. Real crime.

"Are you sure about this?" Matt asked.

"Sure I'm sure. What's the problem?"

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"If we get caught…"

"We won't. Charlie says they don't even have CCTV." Kelvin rested a foot on the wall. Matt noticed he was wearing a pair of brand new Nikes. He had often wondered how Kelvin could afford his clothes. Now, he supposed, he knew. "Come on, Matt," Kelvin went on. "If you're going to be such a wuss, I'm not sure I want to hang out with you. What's the big deal?"

A look of exasperation had crept into Kelvin's face and in that moment, Matt knew he would have to go. If he didn't, he would lose his only friend. When Matt had first started at St Edmund's Comprehensive in Ipswich, Kelvin had taken him under his wing. There had been kids who thought Matt was weird. Other kids had tried to bully him. Kelvin had helped see them off. And it was useful having Kelvin just a few doors away in Eastfield Terrace, where Matt lived with his aunt and her partner. When things were really bad, there was always somewhere to go. And he had to admit that it was flattering, hanging out with someone three years older than him.

"There's no big deal," he said. "I'll come."

And that was it. The decision had been made. Matt tried to damp down the sense of rising fear. Kelvin slapped him on the back. The two of them set off together.

Darkness came very quickly. It was the end of March but there was little sign of spring. It had rained heavily all month and the night still seemed to arrive before it was meant to. As they reached the industrial zone, the street lamps flickered on,

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throwing pools of ugly orange light on to the ground. The area was fenced off with signs warning that this was private property, but the fence was rusty and full of holes, and the only other barrier was the wild grass and thistles that sprouted all around where the tarmac ended. Railway lines stretched out overhead, high up on a series of brick supports, and as the two boys approached quietly, flitting through the shadows, a train rattled past on its way to London.

There were about a dozen buildings in all. Some had advertisements painted on the side: L for Leather, office furniture. J.B. Stryker Auto Engineering. Spit & Polish Industrial Cleaning. Kelvin's warehouse was unmarked. It was a long, rectangular block with corrugated iron walls and a sloping, tiled roof. It had been built slightly apart from its neighbours, separated from them by a row of bottle banks and a junk heap of cartons and old tyres. There was nobody in sight. The whole area seemed deserted and forgotten.

The main entrance to the warehouse – a large, sliding door – was at the front. There were no windows, but Kelvin led Matt round to a second door at the side. The two of them were crouching now, hurrying through the darkness on tiptoe. Matt tried to relax, to enjoy what they were doing. This was an adventure, wasn't it? An hour from now, they'd be laughing about it with their pockets full of cash. But he was uneasy, and when Kelvin reached into his pocket and produced a knife, his stomach tightened and he felt even worse.

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"What's that for?" he whispered.

"Don't worry. It's just to get us in."

Kelvin inserted the point of the blade into the crack between the door and its frame, and began to play with the bolt. Matt watched him without saying anything, secretly hoping that the door wouldn't open. The lock looked secure enough and it seemed somehow improbable that the seventeen-year-old would be able to unfasten it with anything as cumbersome as a knife. But then there was a click and light spilled out as the door swung open. Kelvin stepped back and Matt saw that he was equally surprised, although he was trying not to show it.

"We're in," he said.

Matt nodded. For a moment he wondered if Charlie might have been right after all. Perhaps this was going to be as easy as Kelvin had said.

They went through the door.

Inside, the warehouse was huge – much bigger than Matt had expected. When Kelvin had talked about the place, he had imagined nothing more than a few racks of DVDs in an otherwise empty space. But it seemed to go on for ever, with hundreds and hundreds of shelves numbered and divided into corridors that formed a complex grid system, all lit by vast industrial lights hanging on chains. And as well as the games and the DVDs, there were boxes of computer equipment, Game Boys, MP3 players and even mobile phones, all wrapped in plastic, ready for the shops.

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Matt looked up. There were no security cameras – just like Kelvin had said.

"You head that way." Kelvin pointed. "Go for the small, expensive stuff. I'll meet you back here."

"Why don't we stick together?"

"Don't you worry, Matty. I won't leave without you!"

The two of them split up. Matt found himself in a narrow corridor with DVDs on both sides. Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt… All the familiar faces in the most recent feature films were there. He reached out and took a handful, not even looking at what he'd chosen. He was sure there were more expensive things in the warehouse but he didn't care. He just wanted to get out.

Everything went wrong at once.

It began with a smell that was suddenly in his nostrils, everywhere, coming from nowhere.

The smell of burnt toast.

And a voice. *"Come on, Matthew. We're going to be late."*

A flash of colour. A bright yellow wall. Pine cupboards. A teapot shaped like a teddy bear.

The smell told him something was wrong in the same way that a dog will often bark before danger actually appears. Matt knew that it was odd but he had never really questioned it before. It was a knack … a sort of instinct. A warning. But this time it had come too late. Before he knew what was happening, a heavy hand had clamped down on his shoulder,

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spinning him round, and a voice exclaimed, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Matt felt his arms go weak and the DVDs cascaded to the floor, clattering around his feet. He found himself looking into the face of a security guard and knew at once that this wasn't the old codger Kelvin had described. This was a tall, serious man in a black and silver uniform with a radio transmitter attached to some sort of holster on his chest. The man was in his fifties but looked fit, built like a rugby player.

"The police are already on their way," he said. "You set off the alarm when you opened that door. So don't try anything funny."

Matt couldn't move. He was too shocked by the appearance of the guard. His heart was hammering in his chest, making it difficult to breathe. He was suddenly feeling very young again.

"What's your name?" the guard demanded.

Matt said nothing.

"Are you alone?" This time, his voice was a little kinder. He must have seen that Matt was no threat to him. "How many of you are there?"

Matt drew a breath. "I…"

And then, as if a switch had been thrown and the whole world sent into a spin, the real horror began.

The security guard jerked upright, his eyes widening, his mouth falling open. He released Matt and fell sideways. Matt looked past him and saw Kelvin standing there, a dazed smile

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on his face. At first he didn't understand what had happened. Then he saw the hilt of the knife, sticking out of the guard's back, just above his waist. The security guard didn't look hurt. He just looked surprised. He collapsed slowly, rested on his knees, then pitched forward on to the floor and lay still.

A whole eternity seemed to pass by. Matt was frozen. He felt he was being sucked into some sort of black hole. Then Kelvin grabbed hold of him.

"We've got to move," he said.

"Kelvin…?" Matt fought for control. "What have you done?" he whispered. "Why did you have to do that?"

"What else was I meant to do?" Kelvin demanded. "He'd seen you."

"I know he'd seen me. But you didn't have to stab him! Do you know what you've done? Do you know what you are?"

Matt was speechless, horrified, and before he knew what he was doing, he had thrown himself at Kelvin, hurling him into one of the shelves. Kelvin recovered quickly. He was bigger and stronger than Matt. He coiled forward, then lashed out with a fist, catching Matt on the side of the head. Matt fell back, dazed.

"What's the matter with you, Matt?" Kelvin snarled. "What's your problem?"

"*You* are! You didn't have to do that! You must be out of your mind!" Matt's head was spinning. He didn't know what to say.

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"I was only thinking of you, mate." Kelvin jabbed at him with his finger. "I only did it for you."

The security guard groaned. Matt forced himself to look down. The man was still alive. But he was lying in a pool of blood that seemed to be spreading with every second.

"Let's go!" Kelvin hissed.

"No. We can't leave him."

"What?"

"Where's your mobile? We have to call for help."

"To hell with that!" Kelvin ran his tongue over his lips. "You stay if you want to. I'm out of here."

"You can't!"

"Watch me!"

And then he was gone, disappearing back up the corridor. Matt ignored him. The security guard groaned a second time and tried to say something. Feeling sick, Matt crouched down beside him and placed a hand on his arm. "Don't move," he said. "I'm going to get help."

But help had already arrived. Matt heard the sirens seconds before the screech of tyres announced that the police had arrived. They must have begun their journey to the warehouse the moment Kelvin forced open the door. Leaving the guard, Matt stood up and walked out into the open. A whole section of the wall suddenly slid aside. Matt could see all the way down the warehouse and out into the darkness, which was flashing black blue black blue. There were three cars parked across the entrance. A set of headlamps came on and a

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dazzling beam of light shot through the darkness and hammered into his eyes. At the same time, half a dozen figures, no more than silhouettes, moved towards him. He could see that they were all dressed in protective clothing. Some of them were carrying guns.

They had already caught Kelvin. He was being led, squealing and crying, by two armoured men a great deal bigger than him. Then he saw Matt. At once he turned and pointed.

"It wasn't me!" he whined in a high-pitched voice. "It was him! He made me come! And he killed the guard!"

"Don't move!" somebody shouted, as two more men came running towards Matt.

Matt stood where he was. Slowly, he raised his arms. The palms of his hands were caught in the light from the cars and now he saw that they were glistening red, covered in blood.

"He did it! He did it! He did it!" Kelvin screamed.

The two police officers reached Matt and fell on him. His hands were twisted behind his back and cuffed. He heard the click of the metal and knew there was nothing he could do. Then he was jerked off his feet and dragged, silent and unresisting, out into the night.

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