

RAVEN'S GATE

Before the beginning
was the gate
And five gatekeepers
children

Four boys. One girl.

it has been written

The night of everlasting
darkness is drawing in.

The gate is about to open.
The gatekeepers must return.

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 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 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."

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