

## Chapter 1: What do you think you are?

The chanting continued behind him as he ran, and the sing-song tone it had started with now had a sharp edge of menace.

“Jay Zed Black, watch your back,” “Whacko-Blacko,” “Cracked-Black!”

The boy called Jay Zed Black raced down the inner city streets, keeping ahead of the chasing voices. He was used to providing target practice for the bullies. There wasn't much else to do round their way. This was what they did for fun.

“Threats that rhyme,” he muttered out loud, “Now I'm terrified.”

Jay turned a corner, and ran past the entrance to a narrow alley blocked by overflowing rubbish bins. He span on his heel, running back to look at the alley. Dark, smelly and he'd almost missed it himself. The others might too.

The patter of trainers on tarmac became stronger, like pelting rain. Jay made up his mind. He took off his old baseball cap and threw it as hard as he could down the street. He was surprised how far it flew, a breeze helpfully picked it up and carried it to the next corner. Lucky, he thought. He half-jumped, half-fell over the dustbins, and landed rolling on the other side, his cheap tinted shades falling off with a mild plastic clatter.

Jay looked down towards the end of the alley from his crouched position, as the shouting got louder. He saw better without his scratched sunglasses, and realised that the alley finished in a high brick wall. He'd launched himself into a trap. He curled up and hid, cursing himself.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he said out loud. “I'm thick as you like. I *deserve* to be beaten up.” Jay spoke out loud a lot. He didn't know why. He didn't know who he

was talking to when he did. It was one of the things noted on his psych assessments.

He waited for the bullies to approach, and wondered what his foster carers, Anita and Bill, would say if he limped home again, with bruises or a black eye. They'd probably look at him nervously, and say nothing. Pretend it hadn't happened, so they wouldn't get blamed.

Anita and Bill seemed a little scared of him. Not because he was intimidating, he was skinny and awkward. It was more like they were scared of catching whatever he had. The disease that made him different. The thing that got him bullied and beaten up.

Jay felt a bit sorry for them. He knew they wouldn't want to take him to casualty again. He'd been there three times in the six months that he'd been in their care, and none of them had been their fault. Anita and Bill weren't bad people, but sometimes he felt angry with them too. The pair of them seemed just so helpless, but they were meant to be on his side. They were paid to be. They were pathetic. All of them. The pack. The paid-for parents.

"Puny humans," he whispered. The lightning flash of fury he felt as he said it scared him. His face and hands burned.

The beating feet ran past the alley, along with the shadows and blurs of half a dozen teenage boys and girls. Jay saw Khan leading, with Finn and Toby bringing up the rear. Not one of them glanced his way. Jay held his breath, then blew out slowly with relief. He was stupid, but he was lucky, once again. Lucky that Khan's crowd were thicker than him.

Jay didn't wait for them to notice their mistake. Without his cap to hide under, he messed up his hair, so it fell over his face. Then he pulled off his cheap

checked shirt, shoving it into his almost empty backpack with his scratched sunglasses. He picked up a stray supermarket bag that was spilling out with the rubbish, and squashed his backpack into it.

It wasn't much of a disguise, but at least he looked different from a distance. Now if the bullies turned back, they wouldn't see a backpacked boy with a baggy shirt, shades and baseball cap. They'd see a skinny boy in an unremarkable grey T-shirt, with untidy hair falling in his eyes and supermarket shopping. Jay glanced down at himself.

“Well, now you're invisible,” he said ironically.

A matronly woman who walked past the alley gave him a searching look, an empty crisp packet in her plump hand. She must have been going to throw it in the bins. Seeing him muttering to himself like a lunatic, she stepped away. She tossed the plastic packet into the alley and started to cross the street. He picked it up for her, and strolled out casually. I'm invisible, he told himself, and I'm lucky, and I'm not as thick as them.

“Hey, is this yours, I think you dropped it?” he said, catching up with her just as the traffic lights flickered yellow. He walked beside her and didn't look back. He heard the bullies running back down the street.

She looked at him crossly. “What's your problem, laddie?” she complained in a broad Scottish accent.

Jay's usual tormentors missed him completely. They might have noticed a scruffy boy out shopping with his mum, being scolded by her as they crossed the street. But they didn't see him at all. It wasn't the disguise that did it.

They were looking for a boy who walked alone.

Jay sloped quietly back home, a third floor flat on a scruffy council estate in a scruffy bit of South East London.

In the small estate playground, a young girl was sitting on the swings, in an oversized strappy dress too cold for the weather. She was humming to herself, pushing the swing forward listlessly with her dangling feet.

She made a face at him as he passed, pretending she was ripping off a mask with a hand, with a monstrous leer and hissing sneer, her eyes rolled back in her head. He laughed despite himself. They were both fairly new to the estate. Sophie hadn't yet worked out that she was meant to ignore him.

"Alright, Soph."

"Made you look, made you stare, made you wish you wasn't there," she chanted back.

"Wish you weren't there, more like," he said. Correcting her grammar. No wonder the other kids beat up on him.

"But I *have* to be here," she shrugged. "It stinks at home. Freezer's broke down. Fish fingers in it. Veggie nuggets. All gone south. Stinks to high heaven."

Jay looked at her swinging alone, pale and shabby as the ghost of a Victorian orphan. The council had cleaned up the playground after complaints about the graffiti and the rubbish sunk into the woodchip: plastic packets, beer cans, soiled nappies and more stuff too disgusting to mention. But the mournfully bright lick of paint on the swings and roundabout made the rest of it look worse somehow.

"You'll catch your death in that dress," he said.

She looked at him scornfully. He realised that she wasn't making a fashion

statement. She just didn't have anything else to wear. He pulled his shirt out of his bag, and passed it to her.

"Ta," she said politely, pulling it over her bare shoulders like a superhero's cape. "So, what's up with your hair?" she asked.

"Oh, I threw away my cap. Lost it, I mean," he said.

"First your hat, then your shirt. Careless, aren't you?" she said. "You'd best get home before you lose any more of your clothes."

Jay shrugged, "Doesn't matter if I do. Turns out I've got super powers. I can make myself invisible."

Sophie knotted his shirt securely around her neck. She raised her head to retort, but she saw that he'd gone. Disappeared. She glanced around for a moment, in case he was just hiding behind the low wall of the playground, or one of the weedy bushes, but he wasn't.

"Made me look, made me stare," she called out to him, with grudging admiration. She added more quietly to herself, "Made you wish you wasn't there."

Jay raced up the stairs, passing Sophie's first floor flat. She was right, the smell of putrid freezer food from her kitchen was overpowering. Her young mum was panicking, frying four kinds of breaded nugget, using every ring on the hob. Steam, smoke and stink were tumbling out of the open window.

Jay thought she glanced towards him as he went by. "Alright," he said, in a friendly way. But she just looked straight through him. Jay felt stricken, but didn't break pace. He walked on, trying to decide whether it was any better to be ignored, than to be beaten up.

Jay ran up the next two flights. He never risked the lift, it smelled of cat pee and the grinding mechanism was always breaking down. When he got to his peeling front door, he looked down to the playground. Sophie was still alone there, on the painted square of tarmac and woodchip.

Jay let himself into the flat and was faced with his own reflection in the hall mirror. He saw what Sophie meant about his hair. It was too curly, thick and messy. He usually kept it hidden, but now it looked boy-band conspicuous. His eyes were dark-brown and bright-green. Not a mixed mulch of hazel, which he wouldn't have minded, but two distinct colours. Like whatever made his DNA couldn't agree, and had split him in two.

Jay didn't like his hair and he didn't like his weird eyes. He didn't like standing out. He hid behind cheap caps and tinted shades from East Street market. He wore them so often, that perhaps he really was unrecognisable when he took them off. Today, his reflection surprised him. He looked almost presentable. Daylight shone behind him from the doorway, wreathing his hair and spilling around his outline.

He shut the door behind him. Indoors, in the gloom of the hallway, he just looked like himself. A fourteen year old boy. Awkward and too-tall. Skin that they called mixed race, although no-one had been able to tell him which races had been mixed. The Greek couple who ran the chip shop spoke to him in Greek. The Pakistani family who ran the corner shop spoke to him in Urdu. The North African bloke who ran the off-license spoke to him in something else. They all asked where he came from. Who his people were. What he was.

Jay was embarrassed that he had no answer to these questions. He'd look blank and walk out. He was a boy from nowhere. He had no people. No mother or

father. He hadn't the slightest memories of Her or Him. He knew that he was different. But he didn't know what he was.

Jay shook his head to clear it. Thinking about this stuff gave him a pain in the gut. He'd been in care all his life. Ditched at birth, he'd gone from the children's home to a succession of foster carers, who hadn't become fond enough of him to make the arrangement permanent. He made them nervous and agitated. They got anxious like Anita, or belligerent like Bill. They were relieved to let him go. He always knew when it would happen. It was when they suddenly became kinder towards him, as though aware they hadn't been kind enough before.

Jay didn't care. He looked after himself. He'd been forced to. When he was a baby, he'd had to strangle a pair of snakes that had come after him in the children's home. He didn't remember it, but the snake attack was written in his notes, and whispered about behind his back by the older kids. Little snake-killing freak.

When he was a toddler, he'd fallen in a pond on a park outing, and no-one had noticed. He remembered that well enough. The nursery workers chatting while he floundered helplessly, like they didn't see him or just didn't care. He'd floated on his back, like a witch, rather than sunk. There must have been air trapped in his coat. He hadn't cried for help. Perhaps he'd already learned that no-one would come if he did. A bigger kid eventually spotted him, and dragged him back to the bank. Jay had never gone near water again.

Jay had got by and grown up. He'd survived. But he'd always thought about Her and Him. He was doing it now. He was looking for them in the mirror. Did his mother have green eyes? Did his father have curly hair? Had they both been golden-brown, like him, or was one pale and the other dark? Were they sorry they'd

dumped him? Did they miss him?

When he looked hard enough, it seemed to him that his reflection split, into a sort of double vision. That each eye was looking at someone different. Her? Him?

Jay heard heels clicking on the walkway. Anita was coming back from her job at the supermarket. He ran to his room and lay on his bed. He'd papered the ceiling with black and white photocopies of comic book heroes, the Hulk, Spider Man, Superman. He always had a niggling feeling that people were looking down on him from above. Watching him. He knew it sounded crazy, but at least in his room, he could choose who they were.

Anita passed his window, complaining about him to Bill on her mobile, although she hadn't even seen Jay that day. She always left the house before he got out of bed. He looked up at Hulk, who was furiously flexing his massive pixelated muscles.

"Puny humans!" Jay said, with that same distorting flash of anger. The words cracked out of him like lightning. He couldn't stop himself. It was like it wasn't even him who'd spoken.

He'd said it too loud. Anita snapped her mobile shut as she walked in the door. This was the sort of thing that weirded them out, and made them think he was odd. A Freak. Whacko-Blacko. Cracked-Black. Health professionals preferred to describe him as Special. Some said he was Non-Neurotypical, as though a longer word would be less worrying.

Jay was more typical than they thought. He had the same dream as every abandoned child. He was still waiting for Her and Him to come sweeping up to the front door, and say how it had all been a terrible mistake. That they missed him and



they loved him. That they'd take him back to his real home.

He felt inside his pillow case for the scarf-sized piece of cloth that he'd left there. He took it everywhere with him, apart from school, where it might get stolen by the bullies. It was the cloth that had been wrapped around him when he was delivered to the children's home. They'd found him dumped in the office like a bit of lost property. No note, no clothes, no nappy even. Nothing but the cloth. It was whiter-than-white on one side, midnight black on the other, and softer than any other fabric he'd ever touched. It had the warmth of wool, the sheen of silk. There was delicate hand-stitching in the corner, the initials J.Z. That was how they'd picked his first names. Jay Zed. Black was the surname of the administrator who'd registered him. It was just a placeholder which had stuck.

Jay heard footsteps approaching the flat, a rapping on the front door. Anita answered it.

"But we're not expecting anyone today from psychological assessment..." she started to say.

Jay recognised the defensive tone of voice. She had it dealing with any authority figure. Teacher. Casualty Doctor. Social Services. The visitor interrupted her, speaking too softly for Jay to hear. Anita's voice changed, as though she had suddenly been won over with a bunch of flowers and an outrageous compliment.

"Charmed, I'm sure, sir. Do come in. Would you like tea? Cake?"

She carried on speaking to the visitor as though he were now her great friend.

"Must admit, we've never had one like him before. Never chats. Never smiles. Eats any food like it's the cardboard it was delivered in. Always disappearing

off.” She added confidentially, in a lower voice, “And he’s always getting into fights. Doesn’t say a word about it. It’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for. That’s what I tell Bill. I don’t know *what* he is.”

“Thank you, dear madam,” replied the visitor. “Tea and cake would be delightful. Perhaps your young charge would care to join us?”

Anita banged on his door. “Jay, someone to see you,” she trilled.

She bustled off to the kitchen, humming cheerfully as though she had helpful bluebirds on her shoulders.

Jay stuffed his scarf in his pocket and shambled out to the lounge, flopping into the plastic-covered armchair. Sitting on the plump sofa was a plump middle-aged man. He had sparkling eyes, neatly combed hair and wore a three-piece suit.

The man looked familiar, but Jay couldn’t place him. He wasn’t one of the psychologists or assessors he’d seen previously. The visitor smiled benignly and didn’t say anything. The silence wasn’t particularly uncomfortable. Still, Jay supposed he ought to say something, before he got another red cross in the box which said, “Uncommunicative”.

“So, what’s with her?” he said, nodding his head towards the kitchen, where Anita was tra-la-la-ing. “Never seen her so cheerful.”

“She’s charmed and disarmed,” said the visitor. His voice had a warm tone that made you want to lean in towards him. “It turns out that I’m terribly charming. Enchanting even. It helps in my line of work.”

“Huh,” said Jay, unconvinced.

The man smiled again, looking Jay up and down. “She’s right, she doesn’t know *what* you are. Do you?”

“Do I what?” asked Jay.

“Do you know what you are?” the man repeated patiently.

Jay still couldn’t place him. It was disconcerting, as one of Jay’s oddities was that he had a photographic memory. He never forgot a face or name.

“Have we met?” Jay asked. The man shook his head, more like a warning, than a no, as Anita came tripping in lightly. She carried a tray jig-sawed with a teapot, cups and slices of the rich fruit cake that she usually kept locked in the cupboard.

“Delicious, dear lady, it all looks wonderful,” said the visitor.

His manner was practically pantomime; he could have been playing a gender-confused fairy godmother on a stage, or Father Christmas at a shopping centre. Anita was simperingly girlish as she poured the tea, and handed him the cake.

Jay reached for the third cup on the tray. The tea was unusually light and fragrant. When Jay looked into the teacup, he could see his reflection in golden-brown. It was the same colour as his skin.

Jay took a sip and felt a warm feeling flush through him. The tea was addictively refreshing. It was only when he had greedily sucked down the whole cup, that he noticed Anita’s tea was different. She was drinking her usual builders’ tea, stewed black, strong enough to stand her spoon up in. For some reason he didn’t find this strange.

Jay never really enjoyed drinking or eating. Anita was right, it all tasted like packaging to him. Cardboard and plastic. Food was the sort of thing he’d happily avoid altogether if there were pills for it. But the unprecedented delight of the tea encouraged him to reach for a finger of the fruit cake.

It was heaven. It melted in his mouth, and made him feel like he was glowing inside. Like somewhere within him, a spark had been struck and a light was shining. He supposed it was the sugar rush. Jay didn't know how to describe the complicated feelings of pleasure and confusion that this amazing tea and cake gave him. He didn't have the vocabulary.

"This is alright," he said inadequately.

Anita rolled her eyes in irritation, and stage-whispered to the guest, "He never says thank you. Or please."

"You're quite right, dear lady. Manners Makyth Man. And Us, too. Your tea is worthy of more than mere thanks, it's nectar, pure and true. And your cake, ambrosial. Food for the gods."

Anita blushed and sank her teeth into her fruit cake. The visitor finished his own slice with apparent relish, but refused a second helping.

"Thank you, madam, but I shall abstain. My own spark of divine fire has been nourished too well by your generosity," he said, dabbing his lips. "A walk is the thing for overindulgence. Fresh air and exercise. Would you allow the young man to accompany me?"

Anita nodded, although she wasn't meant to let Jay go out with strangers. Jay stood up, as after all the unaccustomed eating, he felt like going for a walk too. He wasn't slightly threatened by their nameless guest.

As they walked to the door, the man nodded towards a set of Anita's framed family photos in the hallway. Jay passed them all the time, but had never really looked at them before. The twinkling stranger was the spitting image of Anita's father. Jay looked curiously at him, but still followed him out, picking up his spare

cap and shirt from the coat rack.

“Are you Anita’s long-lost uncle or something?” he asked. “She never said her dad had a twin.”

“I made myself into someone she trusts,” replied the visitor.

He strolled along, watching as Jay pulled his baseball cap tight over his head, and slapped on his scratched glasses, so just a patch of his face could be seen. The baggy shirt completed his disguise.

“I’d have a job to do the same thing for you. There’s no-one you trust, is there?” The man’s voice was different, more matter-of-fact.

“Where are we going?” Jay asked.

“A stroll to the river, I think,” the visitor replied. “I’ve answered all your questions, and you haven’t answered mine yet. Tell me, what do you think you are?”

“Dunno,” said Jay, resisting the urge to correct grammar again. Surely he meant, “Who,” not “What”? He found himself thinking of all the names he’d been called, in the last few hours alone. Weirdo. Freak. Whacko-Blacko. Cracked-Black. None of them kind. None of them really untrue.

“Well, at least that’s honest,” said the man, “That’s why I’m here.”

Jay sighed. Another shrink trying to help him “find himself”. He wondered what wholesome therapy this one would recommend. Diaries and painting, meditation and exercise, fresh fruit and vitamins. He’d tried them all, but he hadn’t got better. He’d stayed who he was.

He noticed that the visitor wasn’t staying who he was. The man seemed to change appearance as they walked together to the river. He became taller and younger. Less tidy and better-looking. By the time they arrived at the Thames, he

was quite a different person. He was a roguishly handsome teenager.

Jay was surprised most by the fact that he didn't find this surprising. He still felt that woozy, warm feeling from the tea and cake. He realised with a start what must have happened. Anita could never make tea that fragrant, or serve cake that good. This strange man had swapped them. He'd been warned about this sort of thing at school. Sweets from a Stranger. Stranger Danger.

"You've drugged me," he said, "You drugged her too."

"Pish-posh-tosh. I've done nothing of the sort, Jay," said the handsome boy briskly.

He was still wearing the suit, and looked maybe four or five years older than Jay. The boy leaned out over the stone wall. He looked across the grey river on the grey day, at the imposing buildings lining the Thames. The bridges carrying honking traffic, red buses and beetling black cabs.

"Do you remember me now?"

Jay stood beside him, and hung over the wall too. He watched the water breaking, as though large fish had been leaping up, vigorous and playful. A memory came back as sharp as a series of crisp photographs. He was two years old, floating on his back on the surface of murky pond water. He wasn't crying out. His eyes were wide open as his face slid underwater, and bobbed back up again. Another face looming over him. The kid who pulled him out.

"That was you?" Jay stared hard at the boy's profile, "Ace, that was your name, wasn't it? What are you doing playacting at being old blokes from social services?"

"I've played at more than that today," said Ace, "I've been a busy boy on your

SHORTLISTED ENTRY – Jay Zed Black by Roopa Farooki

behalf.” He grinned, squeaking “What’s your problem, laddie?” in a falsetto Scottish accent.

Ace’s face rippled like water and changed into the woman at the crossing, who’d stopped him from being seen by Khan’s gang. The strange effect only lasted an instant, no longer than the flickering of a flame in the breeze. Jay might have imagined it.

“Huh,” he said, stupidly.