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Opening extract from

Street Heroes: Runaways

Written by

Joe Layburn

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When I first heard his voice, late that autumn night, my nerves were already messed up. Whitechapel High Street, eleven o'clock. A drunken old tramp had just lurched across the pavement towards me like a wild-eyed zombie. There was even a ghostly mist in the damp East London air. It felt as if I was walking through the set of a cheap horror film.

My name is Jack. I know that you can hear me. Please be afraid!

It was someone's idea of a joke. Nothing to get freaked out about. That's what I told myself, anyway.

Remember, I've been hearing voices all my life, starting with my sister Fatima's. She has always been able to read my mind, share her thoughts with me, even when we are far apart. But this wasn't a child's voice or even a young person's. It was deep and strange, and 'Jack' was using Fatima's trademark greeting.

I said, I know that you can hear me, Omar.

I actually swung around to check if he was behind me, even though I knew this was a 'thought-voice'. When you're telepathic, you get used to people dropping into your brain for a chat. They're usually friendly. You hardly ever feel threatened by them.

I began walking faster, cursing my father and his forgetfulness. It was his fault that I was out on the streets at all. How many times had he left his glasses at home? And how often had I been called to bring them to our uncle's restaurant so my father could see well enough to sort out the evening's takings?

You seem afraid, Omar, and I like that. You should be scared of me.

I decided to ignore him and his weird, mocking voice. But it's not easy to block people's thoughts. Jack knew that I could hear him. If you try to screen out a thought-voice, it's like not picking up the phone when someone knows you're at home.

I won't be ignored, Omar. That's one thing I cannot stand. I've been around a long time. And people take notice of me.

I'd reached the neon-lit street in Bangla Town where my uncle's restaurant jostled for business alongside all the others. At last I could start to relax. My father wasn't telepathic, nor was my mother or my big brother Sadiq. But they knew about Fatima and me, and what my father called our 'gift'. I would tell my father about the creepy voice I'd been hearing and ask if I could wait to walk home with him.

Of course, it's your sister I'm most interested in, Omar. I've never liked goodness. It's always brought out the worst in me.

I clenched my jaw, my fists. No one threatened my sister - I'd merk them if they



dared. But suddenly, I was flying through the foggy night, sent sprawling by a black bin-liner full of rubbish.

I rubbed the pavement grit off the palms of my hands. The fall had ripped the cloth of my trousers and my left knee was grazed. As I got up, I glanced into a shadowy alley that ran down the side of an off-licence. What I saw there made me shiver. Looming out of the darkness was a tall figure. I could not make out his features, but he was beckoning me towards him with long, bony fingers.

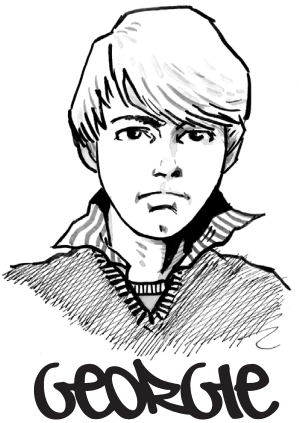
"Come and help me, there's a good boy. I just need a bit of change if you've got any on yer."

I laughed out loud. It was just another old tramp begging for money. I felt relieved, as well as stupid for letting myself get so worked up. That's when I heard Jack's voice again.

Look further down, Omar, past the old fool and the dustbins. It's dark, isn't it? But can you see me? I won't stay in the shadows forever, Omar. This is just the beginning. Even I don't know where it will end.

For a second, I felt too frozen to move. I was afraid for myself and scared for the old tramp too.

"Get out of there, you're in danger!" I screamed. Then, without looking back, I ran.



He kicked me so hard I lost a tooth. He kicked me because he was drunk. He kicked me, as I lay sleeping, because he knew he could get away with it.

It wasn't a dream. I didn't wake up in my nice warm bed. I woke up terrified and cold. I'm always cold.

When he kicked me, I was lying under a blanket on a flattened out cardboard box. I looked like rubbish. He was dressed to kill: sharp suit, shiny black shoes - a young City worker with short, brown hair and flushed cheeks.