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Opening extract from

The Vampire Blog

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunday 30 September
7.15 p.m.

Three things you never want to hear your parents say:

'Let's talk about the facts of life.'

'We're going to start dancing now.'

'Soon, a white fang will appear in your mouth.'

My parents have just told me that last one. Then they went on to tell me . . . well, you just wait.

Today is my thirteenth birthday. And for the first time in the history of the world, my parents bought me a present I actually wanted: an iPod Touch. It's got to be my

Christmas present as well. But I don't care. It's brilliant. And it's no bigger than a mobile phone so it can go anywhere with me. Now I can play video games or go on the internet or blog whenever I want.

And I imagined myself keeping such a sensational blog that just about everyone would be going mad to read it. Well, my blog's going to be sensational all right, but no one can ever see it. What I'm about to tell you, blog, is for your eyes only – and must remain hidden behind a secret password for ever.

Strange how your life changes when you're least expecting it. I was just innocently munching my tea tonight when Mum and Dad suddenly stormed in. Mum switched off the telly and she and Dad sat down at the table with me.

'We want to talk to you, Marcus,' said Dad.

This didn't surprise me. Mum and Dad are always giving me long, boring lectures which really annoy me. That's what I go to school for.

'We thought,' said Dad, 'this would be a good moment to tell you' – he looked at Mum, who nodded slightly – 'about some of the

wonderful changes that will soon be taking place in your body.'

'Getting tons of acne and my voice going all wobbly, you mean,' I said.

'There are other changes too,' said Mum softly.

Oh no, here it comes, I thought, the facts of life talk. My toes were curling up with embarrassment already. 'Not while I'm eating, Mum, please. You'll put me right off,' I said. 'And we've done it in biology anyway, so I know all the gory details.' Then I smiled, looked hopefully at the door and said, 'Hey, Mum and Dad, it's been great hanging out with you both and don't be strangers now. Bye.'

But neither of them budged. Instead, they glanced quickly at each other again. Then Dad piped up, 'The thing is, Marcus, you're special.'

'Oh, I'm the best.' I grinned. 'And I'm so glad you've realized it – at long last.'

'But a few extra things are going to happen to you which your friends won't experience,' he continued.

'Like what?' I asked cautiously.

‘Well, you will smell quite horrid,’ said Mum.

I sniffed my armpits. ‘Are you saying I stink?’ I asked.

‘No, no,’ said Mum, ‘but you will for a little while, or rather your breath will. And there’s nothing you can do to take away the smell.’

‘And soon,’ said Dad, ‘a white fang will appear in your mouth.’

I gaped at him. ‘Dad, what on earth are you talking about?’

But he just rattled on. ‘Now, the fang will only be there for a day. And it’s nothing to worry about, quite natural for someone as special as you.’

Dad looked as if he was about to say a lot more, but then Mum cried, ‘Well, I think that’s enough information for our first little talk.’ And she started to get up.

‘Er, hold on,’ I said. ‘Just why is a fang coming my way? You’ll be telling me next I’m turning into a vampire!’

I rolled around laughing after I’d said that. Well, the atmosphere had got very tense without me quite knowing why. So when in doubt, laugh. Laughing is what life should be

all about. That's what I say anyway. Only I suddenly noticed that Mum and Dad weren't even smiling. And then I spotted little beads of sweat on Dad's forehead.

'Hey, you two are really freaking me out tonight, you know,' I cried. 'You've put me right off my food as well, and usually nothing in the world can do that . . . now, just tell me, what's going on?'

Dad said slowly, 'You're not a vampire.'

'No, well I never really thought I was,' I said. 'They don't even exist, do they?'

Dad didn't answer this, but then said, very slowly and carefully as if he was translating what he was saying from another language, 'Your mother and I are, we're proud to say, half-vampires, well, nearly half – probably about forty per cent vampire. But we call ourselves half-vampires and we believe you are one too.'

When you hear something as totally mind-boggling as that, you don't leap about and go mad (that comes later). No, you swallow very, very deeply and think: This is either a dream and pigs will fly through the window any second now. Or my parents have both

TOTALLY FLIPPED. Yes, that's what's happened. The stress of modern life has really got to them.

So, smiling in quite a kindly way at my loopy parents, I asked, 'Now, how long have you thought you're half-vampires? Let's start with you, Dad. Just sit back, relax and tell me all about it.'

'It's a bit of a shock when you first hear, isn't it?' said Dad.

'Yeah, it is really,' I said, 'especially when I don't believe a single word of it.'

'We shouldn't have told you like this,' said Mum. 'The manual said to break it to you in stages.'

'What manual?' I asked.

'Oh, just a little guide for people in this situation,' said Mum. 'And we so wanted to do it right.'

'So how many half-vampires are there?' I asked. 'Or is it just you two crazies – and now lucky old me, of course?'

'There are more of us than you might think,' said Dad.

He was saying everything so calmly, and he didn't seem as if he was cracking up.

‘Look,’ I burst out, ‘correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t vampires have big teeth and very dodgy habits? Oh yeah, and aren’t they supposed to crumble into dust in the sun and live for five centuries? Hey, you’re not going to tell me you’re both two hundred and fifty years old now, are you?’

Mum and Dad actually relaxed a bit then, and smiled as Mum said, ‘You mustn’t believe all the stories. They’re full of such wild exaggerations and we’re only half-vampires, of course. But you know that neither your father nor I like the sun.’

And with a flash of shock I did remember how carefully Mum and Dad always wrapped up on sunny days. And we never went to hot places for our holidays either. In fact, Mum and Dad much preferred off-peak winter breaks. But I thought that was just because they were being a bit stingy with their money.

‘We do like the odd trickle of blood,’ went on Mum. ‘It’s remarkably refreshing actually. But only as a wonderful little treat now and again. And we do enjoy visiting graveyards at night; well, they’re just so full of atmosphere.’

‘But we’re no older than you think,’ continued Dad. ‘Half-vampires enjoy very long, active lives though. In fact, your great-grandmother lived long enough to see you when you were a little baby.’

Then Mum produced this photo of a remarkably ugly baby (me) sitting on the lap of a tiny woman who looked like a very battered doll.

‘I’ve seen this picture before,’ I said.

‘But we never told you how old your great-grandmother was when this was taken,’ said Mum excitedly. ‘She was a hundred and twenty-four.’

‘And she only looks a hundred and twenty-three,’ I said. ‘Amazing. So she was a half-vampire as well?’

‘A very proud one too,’ said Dad. ‘She said our very long lives made us like time-lords. And she was active to the very end. Now, look at your grandparents . . . they might be retired, but neither your mother’s parents nor mine want to just sit at home. They’re all off travelling right now, aren’t they?’

‘But there is one important rule for us half-vampires,’ said Mum. ‘We must keep our

identity secret. For if ordinary people knew about us . . .'

'We'd make them very nervous,' said Dad. 'There are just so many wild tales about us, so it's best they don't know what we are.'

'And I'm definitely a half-vampire?' I said.

'Almost certainly,' said Mum, 'but we'll know for definite in the next day or two. That's when these changes we mentioned should start.'

'So if I have disgusting breath and grow a fang I'm one of you?' I said.

Dad nodded slowly. 'But remember, there's nothing to worry about, only . . .' He hesitated.

'Yes?' I prompted.

Dad leaned forward. 'The difficult part for you will be over the next few days, when the vampire side of your nature tries to come through.'

'Just let that happen,' said Mum. 'Don't block it in any way. That's very important.'

'Any more questions?' asked Dad.

'Yeah, can you and Mum turn into bats?'

Mum actually blushed and Dad coughed

shyly. 'We don't like to show off . . . We'll tell you about that another day.'

'I can't wait,' I said, suddenly jumping up.

'Where are you going?' asked Mum.

'Off to ring the hospital, as you've both gone completely nuts.'

'Oh, Marcus,' cried Mum.

'I'm sorry, but there's weird and then there's this. I don't believe a word of it. I'm going out now.'

'No—' began Mum.

But Dad cut in. 'That's all right, let him stretch his legs for a few minutes.'

And I just tore outside.

8.25 p.m.

I had to get out of there. I mean, here were my parents telling me all this universe-shattering stuff, but in such a calm, everyday way. That really freaked me out. I tell you, blog, something very creepy is going on in my house.

Unless – well, it could just be a huge practical joke, of course. But my parents aren't into stuff like that. Or maybe it's some kind of test? My parents love anything

educational. But what's educational about saying they're half-vampires?

No, I've got to just hope my parents have gone insane. And if they haven't . . . WHAT IS GOING ON?

Answers in blood on a gravestone.

9.05 p.m.

Went off on my skateboard for a bit, and then called on Joel, my best mate.

His mum answered the door, glaring hard, as usual. 'Oh, hello,' I said cheerily, 'is Joel there?'

'He's in disgrace,' she snapped, 'so you can see him for just five minutes. He's in his bedroom – where he'll stay for the rest of the night.'

Upstairs, Joel told me about his latest crime.

'Well, it was my little brother's birthday today and it was so boring . . . until I organized the biggest jelly fight you've ever seen.' He grinned. 'But I haven't forgotten it's your birthday and I have for you . . . a world-class card.'

I opened up the envelope. 'Hey, you made it yourself.'

'I spent several seconds on it too – and look at the bold way I wrote: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MARCUS. There's even a little picture of a cake.'

'You spoil me.'

'So did anything exciting occur on your birthday?' asked Joel.

Sitting here in Joel's room, all that seemed far away now. I was right back in the normal world again. I showed him my iPod Touch, then I asked, 'Joel, would you say my parents are weird?'

'Oh yeah, but then all parents are.'

'But are mine especially weird?'

'Yeah, probably, but in a good way. I mean, your mum is nothing like mine. She's so laid back for a start, and she just drifts about the house in a dream. Not hot on the old housework either, is she?'

This was true. Our house was full of arty pictures and books, but it was sort of messy too. I knew Mum hated disturbing cobwebs. And she wasn't the least bit scared of spiders either – in fact she treated them like little pets.

I suddenly pictured Mum with her long,

dark hair and all those jingly earrings she always wore. Yes, you could sort of imagine her slinking about in a horror film. But not Dad: a smallish man with a wispy beard and with an eager, helpful smile on his face and a trace of a Brummie accent. But he does have a study full of gory tales – shelves and shelves of them, in fact. Still, that doesn't prove anything. After all, he runs a bookshop. So why shouldn't he collect horror books?

'You're looking very thoughtful,' said Joel, 'or have you just got wind?'

9.50 p.m.

When I got back, my parents were waiting at the door for me.

'Ah, here he is,' said Dad, all smiley.

'Yeah, it's me. Not that I'm quite sure who I am right now – or who you are, come to that.'

'We've got something to show you,' said Dad. And when we went and sat down in the kitchen he handed me a little silver box. 'Maybe you've seen that in my study,' he said.

And I had, far away on a high shelf. I'd even vaguely wondered what was inside it.

'You can open it up,' said Dad.

I did, and inside was one small white fang. 'And this is yours?' I said.

'That's right,' said Dad proudly.

And seeing it and the look on Dad's face suddenly made everything they'd said seem horribly real.

'So this dangles off your mouth for a day,' I said, 'and then it just slips off?'

'That's right,' said Dad. 'You usually find it on your pillow the next morning. You get a bit of money for it too, as it's a sign your transformation into a half-vampire is underway. And when you've changed over, a second fang will appear – a yellow one.'

I nodded, slowly taking all this in. 'And you had fangs too, Mum?'

'Yes I did,' she said, 'but unfortunately I lost my white one. I really regret that now. I'll make sure we keep both your fangs safe.' Then Mum asked, all anxiously, 'So how do you feel about it all now?

'Me?' I grinned. 'I think it's all *fangtastic*.'

I'm such a liar sometimes.

CHAPTER TWO

Monday 1 October
8.30 a.m.

Bit of a weird atmosphere at breakfast. So to cheer things up I burst out, 'I expect you two would rather pour blood on your cereals than milk.'

Mum and Dad both looked very shocked. 'We never speak of such matters in the daytime,' hissed Mum.

'Not another word until nightfall,' said Dad firmly. 'And then only when we're alone.'

9.05 a.m.

There's a girl in my class called Tallulah. You can't miss her. She's got jet-black hair and

has already been sent to the headmaster twice for wearing black nail varnish. She's only been here a short while, and all the other girls hate her already.

Anyway, this morning she jumped to the front of our classroom and said, 'I've got an announcement to make. And it won't interest most of you because you've got no personality.' There were a few muttered protests at this, but she had everyone's attention all right. 'I live on the dark side,' she said. 'And if there's anyone here like me . . .'

'There's no one in the world like you,' I called out. 'Thank goodness.'

'I'm starting a new secret organization called M.I.S.,' she went on, 'which stands for Monsters in School. We'll meet in a secret place tomorrow night and tell really scary tales about werewolves and zombies and, of course, my total favourites: vampires.'

That gave me a bit of a jolt. You don't hear anything about vampires for ages – and suddenly they're mentioned everywhere.

'I should warn you though, we'll be telling very gory stories, so if you're easily frightened don't even think of applying.'

‘It’s not the monsters who frighten me,’ I called out, ‘it’s you.’

I’d only meant it as a joke but Tallulah gave me the full death stare. ‘I knew, Marcus Howlett, that you’d have to try and be silly,’ she snapped. ‘And you’re just a total wimp anyway.’

‘Hey, I resent that,’ I said. ‘One of my toes is quite brave.’

She sighed heavily. ‘If you want to know more about M.I.S. just ask me. I may not accept you as a member though.’ She was looking right at me now. ‘Because I’m very choosy who I allow to be in my society.’

‘In fact, you might not even choose yourself,’ I said.

Tallulah gave me another glare and stormed to her seat as the teacher came in.

‘That girl,’ I said to Joel, ‘has all the charm of a rattlesnake.’

11.15 a.m.

You won’t believe this, blog, but Joel has decided he’s going to join M.I.S.

‘You’d volunteer to spend a whole evening stuck in some grim dive, with her

talking on and on about monsters?' I queried.

'I probably won't go back,' Joel admitted, 'but I'd like to try this M.I.S. once – just for the experience.'

'Well, it'll be just you and her,' I said.

'Oh no, you're wrong there,' said Joel. 'Others have been joining too. But I think they're only going along to laugh at her.' He grinned. 'Which is exactly why I'm going too.'

10.15 p.m.

This evening my dad announced: 'Got a little surprise for you.'

'Not another one,' I said.

'Ah, this is a present,' said Mum.

'My own pet bat?' I suggested.

'Come into the sitting room,' said Dad eagerly, 'so you can see your gift properly.'

I sidled in after them and Dad said, 'This belonged to me.'

'So it's a second-hand present. Wow, thanks.'

'Be quiet, dear,' said Mum. 'This is a very important moment.'

'Sorry,' I murmured.

'I believe the time has arrived,' said Dad,

'to pass this gift on to you.' Then he handed me a cape. It was black, with red lining and a pointy collar. And inside were Dad's initials, which are the same as mine. It was very heavy and nicely made. But it wasn't for me. I knew that, even before I tried it on.

It was too big for me for a start. 'You'll soon grow into it,' said Dad eagerly. 'Now, take a look at yourself in the mirror.'

'So vampires can see themselves then?' I asked.

'Of course,' said Mum. 'You might find your reflection goes a little bit misty over the next few weeks though.'

'Something else to look forward to,' I muttered, 'alongside bad breath and fangs.'

And then I saw myself in the mirror. And I looked so stupid, I burst out laughing. I laughed away until I noticed my parents weren't sharing the joke.

'Look,' said Dad, 'let me borrow it a moment.' He swiftly put the cape on, yet with such care too, as if he were handling something very precious.

'Hey, Dad, it suits you.'

And it did. Even though he's not very big,

the cape didn't take him over. It just made him look much more commanding somehow.

'I'll never forget the first time I put this on, just after my thirteenth birthday,' said Dad. 'And immediately it meant the world to me. And I just felt so proud to be part of—'

'The "We love blood" gang,' I quipped.

'Can we stop the silly comments for five seconds?' said Dad, his voice cracking with anger. 'Is that possible?'

'Yeah, all right, sorry,' I said.

'Because this means a great deal to your mother and me. We're proud of our heritage and . . .' Then Mum tapped his arm and Dad swallowed down what he was going to say next and just murmured, 'Try it again, it's your cape now, so come on, really wear it.'

I put the cape on again. And I did try to conjure up some enthusiasm for it. I even imagined I was a great magician. But the thing just didn't fit and flapped about very uneasily on me. In fact, I felt like a total fraud in it. 'Dad,' I said quietly, 'being a half-vampire could skip a generation, couldn't it?'

'It could,' murmured Dad quietly.

'Well, it has,' I said, even more quietly. 'So, Dad, have the cape back.'

'I've been looking forward to this moment for such a long time,' said Dad.

'I know, and I'm sorry – but if I'm not a half-vampire . . .'

Dad breathed heavily, and then said, 'I won't have the cape back. Hang it on your door and one day soon I know you will wear it with pride.'

I know I won't.

But I put the cape on my door. Only then I kept looking at it. And it's just as if my dad's left one of his suits in my room. That cape practically screams out, *I'm in the wrong place!* That's why in the end I bunged it in the wardrobe. I hung it up properly though.

Then I earwigged my parents, who were whispering away downstairs. Mum was saying, 'You frightened him tonight.'

Dad answered: 'The manual said we were to do this as soon as possible.'

'Yes, but you pushed him too hard,' replied Mum.

I can even feel a bit sorry for Dad, desperately wanting to pass the cape on to

his son and all that. But he can't force me to change into something I'm not, can he?

Tuesday 2 October
6.30 a.m.

Awake already, checking for bad smells and fangs. All clear on both counts. I shan't be turning into a funky half-vampire today or any other day. I'm certain now it's skipped a generation. And I'm one hundred per cent human.

9.15 p.m.

Strange atmosphere at home tonight, very tense and yet eerily calm. Feels as if my parents are just waiting for something to happen. Only it never will.

9.45 p.m.

Joel just rang, fresh from the first-ever introductory M.I.S. meeting. 'Oooh, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. First of all, we met up with Tallulah.'

'Who are we?'

'Oh right, there were seven of us, all lads

from our class and her, and she took us into the woods.'

'Oooh-er.' I laughed.

'A secret place that I can't even tell you about. Well, I might in a minute. But anyway, she led us all in, and you know how the head-master looks when he's giving us a right telling-off in assembly, well that's exactly how Tallulah looked. She was dead stern.'

'I don't know how you kept a straight face,' I said.

'Oh, there's more,' said Joel. 'We all sat round in this secret place and she'd provided some food for us, which I thought was a thoughtful gesture. Next she told us a long, grisly tale which would have scared you, Marcus. Then she told us M.I.S. members must be ready at all times to shake up boring, everyday life – just as monsters do. So she's going to set us our first challenge soon. And our motto is just two words: *Monsters rule*. That's why if we want to come again we've got to wear a mask. No one will be admitted if they're not disguised as a monster. Then we left our secret meeting place.'

'Which was where?' I asked.

'Now, don't be offended, but I'm not going to tell you, because I did swear to keep the meeting place secret from everyone.'

'But you'll never go back again,' I said.

'Well, here's the funny thing, I think I will, as I've got a werewolf mask I haven't worn since Halloween about three years ago.'

'It probably won't even fit you now,' I said.

'But it's the thought that counts,' said Joel. 'And yeah, I'll go back just one more time as . . . well, just as I was leaving, Tallulah said that she was very surprised to see me there tonight – but actually she thinks I might have some monster potential.' Joel started to laugh again. 'I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.'

Wednesday 3 October
7.05 a.m.

Terrible news!

I woke up to discover a horrible smell in my bedroom. Really foul, like rotting seaweed and the stinkiest fart you've ever smelled all mixed up together. It was totally disgusting.

Then I realized where the smell was coming from – me; or my mouth, to be more precise. I stank.

I sped off to the bathroom and started wildly brushing my teeth. But I just couldn't take away that stink from my mouth.

And then I noticed the bathroom door slowly opening. Mum was standing there, looking so triumphant.

'It's started, hasn't it?' she cried excitedly.