

Blue Blood Babies

Chapter One

There's something wrong with me. It's hidden, under the skin where nobody can see, but I know. I know, my parents know, and my baby sister Anna knows. But that's it. Not another soul. Not even my best friend. Because there are some things you just don't talk about. You shouldn't be ashamed of it, my mum tells me, but that doesn't stop her concealing it from everyone in her life – even my grandparents.

It started before I was born. My mum was just six weeks pregnant, and she was at her first visit to see the doctor. He was worried, he told her. Worried because, at thirty-seven, she was older than the average first-time mother. Her health could be at risk; her health, and the health of her unborn child. But not to fret, there were things they could do. For example, the pharmaceutical company, Axloncentrix, had just released a new drug, and its primary function was to ease pregnancies for women such as my mother. He had a poster about it on his wall, and a free sample she could take away today. Just try it and see how great you feel.

You can imagine what happened next.

Seven months and three weeks later I was born, perfectly healthy, if a little late. In the hospital, everything seemed fine. I passed all the examinations: sight, hearing, reflexes. Then there were the blood tests. My mum was too busy dealing with a wriggling, screaming baby, irate at the needle that had just been plunged into its veins, to notice that as soon as

she left the room the nurse ran down the corridor, the tiny vial of my blood clutched in her hands, face grim. Then the doctors started coming to see me. They tickled my chin, smiled reassuringly at my mother, and left, whispering furiously. That was the first clue.

The second followed soon after, and it was a whopper. I was wrapped snugly in a soft, woollen blanket, Mum dressed in real clothes for the first time in days, holding me close, protectively and still a little gingerly - there weren't a lot of babies in our family – and my dad was there, grinning like an idiot and clutching the “hospital bag” in one hand and the “every little thing a baby might possibly need bag” in the other. It was a nice day, in the middle of summer, and the sun was shining brightly. Mum only made it one step outside the door before she stopped dead in her tracks, gaped down at me, then whirled around and sprinted back inside, screaming that her baby, her new-born angel baby, was sick, suffocating, diseased, dying. Somebody do something!

But there was nothing they could do. Because, medically at least, as far as they could see, there was nothing wrong with me. No mystery illness, no circulation problem squeezing the blood out of my veins. I was fine. I was more than fine, they said, I was unique. In the weeks and months that followed, as the story broke in the papers and on the movebox, my parents came to realise that I was not unique, but definitely rare. Different.

I was a blue blood baby. Some strange chemical reaction against the drug my mum had taken had turned the blood running through my veins a strange hue of blue. It was all but invisible under the electric lights, but outside, under direct sunlight – like some badly made up vampire in a dodgy B-movie – it showed. Unlike other babies, who had a healthy pink glow, I looked like death, or as if I was freezing cold.

Of course, the global catastrophe just four years later changed everything. After that there was no sunshine for anyone. Then we moved. And the secrecy started.

I have a little secret of my own, something nobody knows. I discovered it by accident one day, just messing about. It was in school, in Science to be precise, and we were experimenting with UV lights. I forget what the point of the lesson was, the experiment hadn't worked at any rate, and the teacher was trying to explain to us what we should have seen, if the equipment had functioned, which it didn't. I had already tuned him out, and was playing with the tiny UV flashlight – about the only thing which did work – training it on the unsuspecting arms, faces, exposed slithers of back of all of the people sitting in front of me. Bored, I started doodling shapes with it on the back of my hand. Just circles and arrows and the like, I'm not particularly artistic.

That's when I saw it.

Just to double check, I shone it on the arm of the girl sitting at the table diagonally left from me, then back to my hand. I was right. Looking around to make sure no-one was watching, I slid the UV light in my pocket, took it home, and performed surreptitious experiments on Anna and my dad. Same result. On them, the light showed up purplish-blue, on me, green. It was as clear as day. Or as clear as days ever get anymore. It was a revelation, like a secret weapon. Over the next few days I tried out my test on everyone in the school, and then everyone I came into contact with. I didn't find anyone else who glowed green. But I told no-one. If my mum had found out, she'd have had the light off me faster than Anna can sink a double-hamburger. Maybe she'd have been right.

Anyway, that's what I was playing with – OK, obsessed with – the day that this all started. I was in my room, pretending to watch a daft chat show on the movebox, play my Gamer and listen to heavy metal on my Blaster simultaneously, whilst actually turning my UV flashlight on and off and on and off, and watching my skin go from normal, to green, to normal, to green. Without warning the door swung open.

“Alfie!” Anna screamed. She was wearing an annoyed expression and holding the phone tightly in one hand.

I jumped about a foot in the air, trying to hide the little torch and mute the blaring music in the same moment.

“What?” I snapped, startled and irritated.

“What were you doing?” she asked me, green eyes narrowing in devious suspicion.

“Nothing!” I retorted quickly, too quickly. A smile spread across her face.

“Yes, you were,” she taunted.

About half a second later I realised what she thought she'd caught me doing, despite the fact that I was quite clearly still fully dressed.

“Shut up, Anna,” I scowled. I shoved myself off the bed, making sure to tuck the little torch out of sight under the duvet, and crossed the room. Towering over her, I folded my arms across my chest and fixed her with my most menacing glare. “What do you want?”

I could see her consider continuing to tease me, but she seemed to think better of it after taking a long look at my face. Smart girl.

“Calum was on the phone for you,” she said, holding out the receiver. “But now he’s gone.”

She shoved the phone in my hand before flouncing off back down the stairs, curly blond hair bouncing on her shoulders. Muttering to myself about the idiocy of little sisters, I shut the door to my room and dialled my best friend’s number.

“Calum,” I said, as soon as he picked up with his usual grunt.

“Alright, mate. Did your sister tell you I phoned?”

“Yeah,”

“She said you were, eh, ‘busy’,” he laughed.

“She’s hilarious,” I replied, making a mental note to kill her at the first opportunity. “What’s up?”

“How do you fancy accompanying me to a party?”

“What, as your date? I thought we’d talked about this.”

“Hilarity runs in the family, I see,” he quipped.

“When and where?” I asked, hedging my bets. Calum had a history of dragging me to some God-awful places.

“It’s Jasmine’s sixteenth, down at the Warehouse. Seven o’clock start.” The Warehouse was a club down by the docks, not a dive by any standards. I was impressed.

I looked at my watch. It was already after five.

“I was going to go for a run,” I said, considering.

“You’ve got loads of time! Charlie will be there...,”

“Yeah?” He had my interest now.

“Come on!” Calum whined.

“Alright, alright,” I grinned down the phone, giving in. “I’ll be at yours at half six.”

“Excellent.”

As soon as I hung up I stripped off my t-shirt and jeans, and yanked on my running stuff. I was going to have to cut it short today. I thumped down the stairs, pausing at the front door to pull on my running shoes and yell an explanatory goodbye to my mum, who was in the kitchen creating another inedible extravaganza. Whatever today’s treat was, it smelled rancid. No wonder I was thin.

Outside the house I veered off to the left, heading along my street down towards the wasteland. I liked to run down there; it was quiet, peaceful. A vast expanse of absolutely nothing – no houses, factories or even roads. I’d often wondered why the government didn’t grass it over, add a few flower beds and call it a park, but I was glad they hadn’t. This way, empty and dead as it was, it felt like my own private space. To be honest, just about every road in Kirkford was the same. Nobody liked to walk on the streets anymore, even after twelve years, despite all the Government ads and information drives telling us that it was safe – healthy even – to get out there and breathe the air. Still people went from their houses to their cars, to wherever it was they wanted to go, then back into their cars and then houses. Some of them, the really paranoid ones, still wore masks every time they went outside. No matter where I ran, I never had to fight for pavement space. But I liked the wasteland.

Wary of time, I cut across the middle, rather than circling all the way around. The way was a bit rougher, little hillocks and uneven footing that tested my calf muscles, not to mention my balance, and I almost stepped on a crazy kipper in a ditch, one of the long term homeless by the state of his clothes and the length of his beard. He yelled in surprise as I jumped over him, but by the time he'd hoisted himself into a sitting position to shake his fist and shout at me, I was long gone.

Back home, despite my short cut, I really was pushing time. Pulling off my t-shirt as I ran, I elbowed Anna out of the way at the door to the bathroom. She had the towel, book and monster bag of sweets of a two hour bath in her hands. She started screaming just as I flipped the shower on, and I knew I had about ninety seconds of hot water before she made it downstairs to turn off the water heater power switch. Executive decision: I washed my hair first. I hated sticking my head under the cold water. Sure enough, before I was halfway through soaping up, the water turned ice cold. Bracing.

I'm not a vain guy, but I will confess that I spent an indecent amount of time standing in front of my open wardrobe selecting an outfit. I had already gelled my hair into a carefully dishevelled bouffant - it gets impossible when it's dry. Normally I wouldn't put this much effort into my appearance, but Calum had said Charlie would be there. In the end I went for a pair of dark blue jeans with more zippers than they had pockets, and a light blue shirt with some daft slogan emblazoned across the front. Casual but cool, I thought, nodding to myself in the mirror. Maybe I'm a little vain.

I passed Anna on the stairs, still holding on to her ridiculously long bath-time accoutrements, on her way for attempt number two. I shoved her into the banister to punish her for the cold water shower incident.

“Put your collar down,” she snapped at me, rubbing a bruised elbow. “You look stupid.”

“Shut up!” I snapped back, my usual response to anything she said, but as soon as she was out of sight I yanked my collar back down. My sister knows about these things.

“Alfie,” my mum called to me from the kitchen doorway. “You’re not going out without your dinner.”

“I’m late,” I protested. “I’ll get something on the way.”

“No, I’ve made you something. Eat it before you go.”

She stared at me, and I glared back. Counted to one, two, three, watching for any change in her expression. Then admitted defeat.

“Fine,” I huffed, stomping in to the kitchen.

It was some sort of stew, beyond that I couldn’t tell you. There were clumps of grey things that I presumed were meat, swimming in an unhealthy green sludge that at one point might have been vegetables. I lifted a spoonful, then let it drop back down into the bowl. It made a gloopy, sucking sound. Trying to keep the nausea off my face, I reached for a large glass of water.

There was a loud scraping noise as my mum pulled out a chair and sat down beside me to eat, no doubt to check that I did actually put some of this “food” into my mouth. She reached for another glass, pill in hand. I watched her, half-jealous, half-smug. The big, blue pill; taken twice a day, with breakfast and dinner, to ward off the effects of never seeing the sun. How ironic that the blue blood babies were the only ones to be immune to the sickness. Maybe the colour of the pill was the pharmaceutical company’s idea of a joke.

I turned back to my dinner. I had a technique for these days, when my dad was out and left Mum in charge of the cooking. I didn't chew, didn't let the food touch any part of my mouth except the top of my tongue, and swallowed as quickly as possible. I usually burned my throat, and the lumps of unmasticated meat were hard to swallow, but trust me, it was preferable.

"Is that it? Can I go now?" I asked, already standing. I'd eaten half the bowl, and if I took another mouthful, I thought I might puke.

My mum nodded absentmindedly, chewing slowly, probably wondering how the hell she'd gone wrong this time. I marvelled at the way she could let each spoonful linger in her mouth and not screw up her face in revulsion. Now I was incredibly late. I really wanted to brush my teeth to get rid of the taste of skanky stew, but there was no way Anna would vacate the bathroom for at least another hour. I shoved my feet in my shoes, grabbed my board from beside the door, and made my way to Calum's.

I loved my board. It was my pride and joy. It didn't hover, like some of the really expensive ones, but it was motorised with a top speed of 6mph. And it was much better than walking. I hated walking; it just seemed too slow, too pedestrian. I could have run, but who wants to arrive at a party red faced and sweating?

"At last," Calum remonstrated when I finally appeared.

"No one turns up at a party on time," I reminded him.

We didn't linger at his house; he was itching to get down to the docks. I left my board tucked safely in his porch, with some reluctance, after he gave me a scathing look.

“How idiotic would you look walking Charlie home on a skateboard?”

I couldn't argue with that.

We made our way down towards the docks, to the Warehouse, on foot and walking, much to my disgust. Despite Calum's complaints we really weren't that late. The docks had been a real dump at one point. My dad had shown me pictures taken about the time that I'd be born. It had been full of tatty looking fishing boats and rickety, wrought iron warehouses and factories. Like a docks, in other words. But then, just a few years later, after the disaster, the Government wouldn't confirm that the fish were still safe to eat, and people wouldn't take the chance. One by one the fishing boats had gone out of business, and the docks had died. For a while it had been worse, just empty buildings used by drug dealers, prostitutes, and ravers. But slowly, the businesses had moved in, and then the restaurants and bars that followed the businesses, and the docks had dragged itself up one remodelling at a time. Now it was urban chic, cosmopolitan. My dad always said it was better before.

The party was in full swing when we arrived at Warehouse. It was a modern monstrosity, all steel pillars and massive planks of stained oak, bolted together with giant iron pins, on display to give it that industrial look. It was a cross between a restaurant and a club, and by the looks of it Jasmine's parents had hired out the whole place. More money than sense, apparently. We had missed the cake, but that was alright by me; Mum's dinner was still sitting in my stomach like lead. Calum looked a bit put out.

Despite Calum's promises, Charlie wasn't there, and so after a quick tour around the place to say hello to a few friends, I plonked myself in a corner, and sulked. The music was dire; boy bands blubbing about love and harpy female solo artists screeching about girl power.

Calum, idiotic Casanova that he was, was dancing in the middle of a huge group of girls, singing along. How did he know all the words? I shook my head and rolled my eyes, pretending not to see him when he tried to wave me over. I don't dance.

I bought a soft drink just for something to do, then returned to my chair in the corner, wondering when it would be acceptable for me to disappear. Calum would be annoyed, but he was probably going to vanish into the bushes outside with one of the mini-skirted wenches squealing with laughter at his every over-exaggerated dance move. I fumbled in one of my many jeans pocket and pulled out the little UV flashlight, shining it across the back of my hand, too brooding to care that I was breaking my mum's number one rule: be inconspicuous. Don't do anything to draw attention to the fact that you're different. Like bleeding. Because that's something I can control. This, though, was stupid, but I was feeling petulant and resentful.

After another five torturous songs, the Cherryfizz I had drunk began to make itself known. Grateful even for the distraction of a bathroom trip, I edged around the dance floor and pushed my way into the men's room. It was empty, a product of the fact that most of the guests at Jasmine's party were female. The queue outside the ladies was probably huge. I took a moment to breathe, revelling in the sudden relief from the obnoxious music, now dimmed to a muted drumbeat. The place was clean, white tiles everywhere with more of the industrial-look exposed wood and steel. There was a faint hint of bleach and lemon on the air. It was altogether more pleasant than being out in the main room.

I heard the door swing open behind me and realised I must look a bit odd just standing there in the middle of the toilet. I approached the urinal, keeping my face forwards, very much minding my own business.

“Alright,” came a voice beside me. It was an older man, maybe about forty. He must be one of Jasmine’s relatives, an uncle or something. He was overdressed for this place, in a suit with a hideous pink and navy tie. I turned and nodded at him, then focused on finishing quickly. I wasn’t sure why, but he made me a little uncomfortable.

As I was no longer alone - and worse, in the company of an adult - I made a show of washing my hands, using the soap dispenser on the wall and everything. I rinsed thoroughly, then reached for the pile of paper towels on a little tiled shelf just above the sinks.

“Shit,” I hissed under my breath, yanking my hands back.

The untrusting people at Warehouse had installed those little lights designed to show up drug powder, and had them trained down on the shelf; an ideal place if you wanted to snort a little cocaine, I supposed. I had never realised that the light was UV. Under it my hands glowed ghoulish green. A trifle panicky, I wiped my wet hands on my jeans, hoping my little accident had gone unnoticed. I turned around, thinking only of making my escape, then froze.

The man in the suit was right there, a foot from my face.

“Hello again,” he said. His voice was low, a half-smirk smeared across his lips.

I gave him another brief nod, and tried to step around him. He took one, quick pace to the side, cutting me off. I looked at him, starting to feel a bit unnerved.

“I’ve been watching you,” he said.

“What?” I asked, uncomfortable.

“You’re different,” he breathed. “Special.”

What the hell was he talking about? I tried to take a step back, wanting to put a little more distance between us, but my back connected with the rim of the sink.

He smiled at me, and I felt a twinge in my stomach that had nothing to do with the dinner I had eaten. Was he trying to chat me up?

“Look, mate,” I began, holding my hands up in a defensive gesture.

“Ultra-Violet light’s a funny thing, isn’t it?” he asked. I saw the victory in his eyes as he processed my horrified expression. “Most people don’t know that it shows up blue blood. Better than the sunlight, in fact.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I whispered. “What’s that got to do with me?”

It was a weak attempt at a bluff, and he gave me a scathing look.

“Don’t be foolish,” he chided me. “What’s your name?”

I stared at him idiotically, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish, waiting for my brain to rescue me.

“Come on, son,” he prompted. “What’s your name?”

How had no-one else needed to use the bathroom in all this time? I stared at the door, willing it to open and send in my saviour: a witness to stop this stranger restraining me if I tried to make a run for it.

“Who are you?” I asked, stalling.

“I’m an ordinary man,” he deflected, “You’re the one that’s interesting. Now are you going to tell me who you are or am I going to have to take your wallet and check your card?”

There was just a hint of threat, of menace in his tone. Automatically I clamped my hand down against my left hip, protecting the pocket housing my wallet.

“You don’t have the right,” I stammered, unable to put the force into my voice that I wanted.

“Yes, I do,” he replied, supremely confident.

I gawped at him. Only Government officials were entitled to demand to see your identity card. He reached into his jacket pocket, and my pulse erupted into a sprint. Did he have a weapon, something to subdue me with, like chloroform in a gangster movie, or worse, a badge that would mean I would have to do as he said?

I never got to find out. Just as he delved into the depths of his pocket, the bathroom door burst open and two boys, younger than me, maybe fourteen, flew into the room. They were making a ruckus; laughing and clutching each other as they all but fell inside. It was just the distraction I needed. The man’s head whipped to the side, eyes narrowing in anger at the disruption, and I squeezed out from under his scrutiny, all but shoving the boys over as I pushed past them and bolted out of the door.

I didn’t hesitate as I emerged back into the pounding chaos of the club, diving into the writhing mass of dancers, wriggling my way through. It was slow progress, but it was the most direct route to the door, and I hoped the throng of bodies would hide me from view. Somewhere in the middle I bumped into Calum, who had now progressed to dancing with a single girl, his hands clasped on her backside, a big grin on his face.

“Hey!” he shouted when he saw me. His eyes widened with confusion as he read the look on my face.

I didn’t have time to stop. I pushed past him, waving a hand in both greeting and apology, before continuing my battle to the door. Then at last I was free, winding my way through the loose melee of girls loitering on the edge of the dance floor, waiting to be asked. I scanned the door, searching for any sign of a forty-something man in a dark suit with a hideous tie. He was nowhere in sight. I couldn’t even allow myself a sigh of relief, convinced he was going to materialise from out of thin air and clamp a hand on my shoulder. I fixed my eyes on the exit, fighting the panic that insisted I break into a run. Then I was there, banging the door out of my way, and barging straight into a couple kissing on the pavement right outside.

“Sorry,” I muttered in response to the guy’s angry yell.

I started walking the way I was facing. It was the wrong way to get home, but I wasn’t thinking, focusing only on putting as much distance as possible between me and Warehouse. By the time I realised my route was taking me away from the lights of the nearby housing estate and into the darkness of the closed and empty industrial units, it was too late to change my mind.

I wrapped my arms around me, shivering against the chill and wishing I’d thought to bring a jacket. Then I counted to twenty in my head, making each number match two of my quick strides. On the ‘t’ of twenty I turned, craning my neck to get the doorway of Warehouse fully in view. The kissing couple were still there, wrapped around each other, oblivious to the cold and the world. But that was it. I sighed heavily, twisting my body to take two steps

backwards and be sure. Smiling in incredulity, I shook my head. What had that been all about?

Just as I was about to turn away, my brain already plotting a route home that would stop me having to double back past Warehouse – just in case – the door opened. The man stepped out, one hand clamped to his ear. He was talking on a mobile. I froze, watching him. If I had turned my back on him and ghosted slowly away into the shadows, he might not have noticed me, but I couldn't tear my eyes off him. He looked left and right, scanning the street, searching for something. Me. I tried to sidle in against the wall, hoping the slow curve of the street would hide me from view. It was the worst thing I could have done. His eyes snapped to the movement and out gazes locked.

I stepped back, two shuffling paces, recoiling from the venom in his expression.

“Hey” he shouted, angry now. “Hey, wait there!”

It was an order, a barked instruction, and my muscles automatically obeyed, anchoring me in place. It was instinctive, like when a teacher shouts your name at school. Half a second later my brain caught up with my actions. I ran.

I love running. I love the speed, the feel of the rushing air on my face, the blood pounding in my veins as my muscles bunch and then release. I run almost every day, just for the fun of it. I'm fast, and I can go a long way, so I was pretty confident that I could outrun one middle-aged man in a suit. But he wasn't running after me. Why should he? I was heading into a maze of building blocks; factories, small offices, storage units. Every one of them surrounded by roads. All he had to do was run to his car.

I cursed under my breath as I heard the roar of a car engine start, then squeal away from the curb as he floored the accelerator. I took the first street on my left, knowing I had to get off the main road. It was empty, just one white van abandoned outside a grubby looking office identifying itself as a plumbers. I briefly considered hiding behind it – or even under it – but my feet had carried me passed before I could make the decision. About halfway down the street I spotted an alleyway, much too narrow for a car to fit down. I headed for it, full tilt.

Just as I rocketed around the tight corner, feet slipping out from under me as they struggled for purchase against concrete covered with moss, mould and the mushy remnants of sodden paper leaflets, a flash of light flickered over my shoulder. Headlights. The next second I was gone, out of sight down the narrow passage, but the car sped up as, as if he'd caught a glimpse of me. There was the sound of skidding tyres, then a crunch as he threw the car into reverse.

"Dammit!" I hissed. I had to move faster.

Ignore the burning in my legs, I accelerated, leaping over the boxes, bins and assorted junk that littered the alleyway. Ahead of me lay another side road, dimly lit by the glow of a nearby security light. I watched it draw closer, searching for the added brightness of oncoming car lights that would tell me the man had beaten me to it. Nothing changed, so I erupted across it, just catching sight of the car coasting along the main drag out of the corner of my eye. The alleyway must run parallel to it. In fact I was probably running passed the back of the Warehouse right now, back where I'd started. My heart sank as I grasped just how easy I'd made it for the car to follow me. All he had to do was keep going

straight, looking for me at each side road, waiting for the one where I'd try to take a different track.

I slowed as the realisation dawned on me. There was no point sprinting: I was never going to outrun a car. I tried to think. What else was around here? Where could I go?

Then it hit me. I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid before, it was so obvious. This industrial estate backed on to the wasteland. At the end of each of these side roads was a ten foot brick wall, splitting the businesses from the ugly scrub, keeping the thieves and the crazies from sneaking in to rob and vandalise the trade buildings. All I had to do was leg it to the end of the road, scale the wall before the man could run me over in his car, then drop down into safety. I wasn't remotely bothered by the fact that the wasteland would be pitch dark and inhabited by a variety of vagrants looking for a place to sleep where they wouldn't be interrupted by the police. I'd been there loads of times at night.

Buoyed by the optimism of my plan, I sped up again. I'd choose the next side road: there was no point putting it off.

This time I didn't even bother looking for the lingering car, though I knew he'd be there. I rounded the wall then pushed hell-bent for the end of the side road. It was there, maybe three hundred metres ahead.

"Oh yes," I exclaimed, catching sight of two huge industrial bins. They were tucked up against the wall, about six feet in height; the perfect things to get me up and over.

My shadow suddenly burst out in front of me, thrown into stark contrast by the full beams bearing down on me. The roar of the car was louder than my ragged breathing, screaming in my ears and shutting out every other noise. I tried to move faster, but panic made my

limbs clumsy and my technique was sloppy, slowing me down. Gritting my teeth, I concentrated solely on moving my arms and legs as fast as they would go. I didn't dare look back to see how close he was. Would he actually run me down?

I didn't break stride even when I hit the bins, slamming into them, almost knocking the breath from my lungs. My arms shook as they hauled my body up onto the bin lid. I scrambled up on my hands and knees, nervous of standing in case my full weight was too much for the flimsy plastic covering. Crawling, I reached for the wall, flinching at the sound of a car door being opened. Any second I expected him to make a grab for my ankle.

"Stop!" he bellowed. But it was too late, I had a firm grip on the top of the wall, and I slung my leg over, sitting straddled on the top. I glanced at him, struggling to get up on the bin, his face silhouetted by the glare of his car's headlights, fist shaking angrily in my direction.

"See you," I chuckled, suddenly cocky.

I let my leg slip over, then slithered down the wall. It was a long way, and both of my ankles jarred painfully as I hit the thick, long grass of the wasteland. I hissed, and stumbled for a few steps before breaking out into a choppy jog. I didn't think he'd follow me in here, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I knew exactly where I was, and I followed the familiar patterns of lights in the distance, making my way steadily to the dirt road that eventually became the end of my street. As I emerged into the streetlights of my road, I slowed to a limping walk, trying to be inconspicuous. My eyes darted left and right, warily watching for any signs of movement, but I arrived at my house without catching sight of anything out of the ordinary.

It was dark, everyone else was already in bed. I heard the muffled sound of someone rolling over in bed above me, and knew that it would be my mum, waiting nervously awake until I came home. I shut the door loud enough to confirm my entrance, then slunk into the lounge, leaving all the lights off. I lingered at the window for a good hour, watching for the car. Only one vehicle coasted down during all that time: a silver saloon. It could be his car, I reasoned, but I really wasn't sure. The windows were tinted, concealing the driver. Whoever it was didn't pause at my house, but sailed slowly past, then five minutes later drove just as slowly back up. I waited another twenty minutes, but neither that car nor any other came back along. Eventually I gave up, moving stiffly up to my room. I lay there for a long time, playing with the UV torch, shining it on my green skin.