

THE TRUTH OF MIDNIGHT BLUE

by Carlotta Rose

It was a hard place to live in and it had made her hard in places she kept hidden from the world; places that were hidden even from her. Middie lay on her back staring at the ceiling. Another day, so what? Another excruciating day where nothing would be new. The sameness. The dreariness. This house, this life - it's not who I've been in a long time. It's like living in an old skin. The dirt, the mould that flares up when it rains, the cracked concrete floors that seem to be permanently filthy despite my best efforts. The unsealed everything. And Joe. There was a time when I didn't think I could live without him. When the thought of not going to sleep beside him every night and waking up beside him every morning was unthinkable – unbearable even. It was why I'd agreed to stay in this half finished bush house while the house he had promised to build me was being planned...God I'd loved him so much, it'd made all of the inconveniences of living here just fall away. But there's STILL always someone else's job to take care of first...the house is STILL always just around the corner...She groaned. At any moment Joe would be stirring. One last crescendo of nose noise and he was awake, blinking tired, crusty eyes against the morning glare coming through the aluminium framed windows.

“Morning love” he smiled as he turned to give her a kiss. “Sleep well?”

“Morning” she replied, wondering, as she did every morning, how he could be so oblivious. She had stopped trying to conceal her unhappiness years ago, but if he had any inkling of her feelings, he never showed it.

“Any plans for today?” he asked, pulling on his jeans.

“Same old” she replied, not interested in expanding further.

“Well I've got to get going early – crisis at Jim and Sandy's house – the kids need that new play equipment set up by the end of the day or there'll be a meltdown!” Joe grinned. “See you for dinner” he said as he finished dressing and left the room before Middie could reply.

She heard the ute he'd recently purchased to support his growing handyman business pull out of the dirt driveway, and listened as the tyres crunched their way towards the road that stretched along the front of the house. Middie stayed

where she was, thinking about how she and Joe had ended up here, in this dusty routine.

Joe Cook and Middie Stevens had met when Middie was going through the crisis of losing her beloved father, Charles, to his beloved habit, drinking, eleven years ago. Joe had been working as the maintenance man at the funeral home where Charles was cremated, and Middie had literally bumped into him as she made her way across the car park after the ceremony. Joe had steadied her, walked her to her car and, seeing the state she was in, offered to drive her home. Middie, to distraught to protest, had let him and when, upon observing how long it took her to find her house key on her key ring, he had insisted on staying and making her a cup of tea, Middie had let him into her house. And from that time on, Joe had been a part of her life. At first, he had been attentive and passionate, needing her as she needed him. There were promises of filling her life with love and all good things. He had supported her as she navigated the fallout from her father's death, standing beside her when her mother, Rose, tried to sell the paintings Charles had left to his daughter, holding her through many grief filled nights as she sobbed into his shoulder, and listening to her as she told him about how her family had ended up as it did.

Turning on her side, Middie felt tears coming as she recalled her past.

Charles Stevens had been a well meaning man, a dreamer without a practical bone in his body, but with huge amounts of artistic talent – a truly gifted painter. Rose had natural psychic abilities and spent her time giving Readings for friends and caring for Middie, teaching her daughter how to talk to the various Spirit beings that visited them both. For a while they were blissfully happy. But over the years, Charles's passion for liquid pleasure took its toll on his life, and having had enough of his promises to sober up, Rose had started to nag at him day and night, picking apart his every move. Charles began taking more and more refuge in his liquor and eventually, when Middie was twelve, there was a divorce. Charles kept drinking, Rose stayed angry and Middie divided her time between

them, all the while taking comfort in her own secret world of Spirit friends.

Having had enough of remembering, Middie made herself get out of bed, take a shower in the unfinished bathroom, and get dressed. She was about to make her usual vegemite toast for breakfast when she paused, suddenly gripped with the absolute certainty that if she didn't get out of the house NOW, she was going to start screaming. She nearly ran to the dining room table where her handbag was sitting, snatching it up in one hand and grabbing her brown woolen coat from the hook beside the front door with the other as she fled the house which had started to feel more like a prison than a home.

She wandered aimlessly along the main street of the small town that was half an hour from where she and Joe lived. She stared unseeing into shop windows holding promises of the latest fashions that would make it all better, self-help DVDs that would tell her what to do with her life and jewellery that was guaranteed to make her heart sing. Some women would have phoned a friend to meet them for coffee, but Middie didn't have any friends. Joe had been so jealous whenever she'd started to connect with anyone else and so she'd just stopped trying, tired of the inevitable questions and hurt looks whenever she'd even hinted at making plans to spend time with another. She had her Spirit friends – and although Joe thought the whole thing was rubbish, because he couldn't see what she could, Middie managed to keep this precious solace from him.

She was deciding whether or not to go back to the car when she was stopped in her tracks by the sounds spilling out of the speakers that hung above the entrance of the local music shop. She found herself overwhelmed with feelings of joy as she listened to Rhapsody In Blue, her father's favourite song, and without thinking, entered the building. Inside, CDs competed for space with musical instruments and people milled about, chatting and laughing. Middie stood at the edge of it all, uncertain and self-conscious.

"Can I help you?" the man behind the counter called out to her, smiling. Middie squirmed, uncomfortable at being noticed. "No..." she managed "thanks, I'm just looking".

"Ok – just sing out if you need anything" he said, still smiling, and Middie couldn't help but notice how intensely he was looking at her.

"Can I...do you.." she started "can I help YOU with anything?" she blurted out. Amused, the man picked a leaflet up off of the counter and held it out to her.

"Please, take this. I'd love to see you there" he said.

Middie, though slightly offended by the man's manner, was nonetheless intrigued, and stepped forward to take the piece of paper from him. It was an advertisement for a music event that was happening that afternoon at the River Cafe, a local place that she and Joe had gone to once before he'd blacklisted it, declaring it to be full of "weirdos" and "hippies". Someone called Daniel Green was playing and as she looked at the picture of the musician and his guitar, she recognised his smile.

"Ok...look, thanks a lot, but I have a boyfriend" she said, placing the leaflet back on the counter.

Daniel raised his eyebrows and Middie saw something in his eyes that made her knees want to buckle.

"That's great - but wouldn't you rather have a man?" he replied, enjoying the way Middie's cheeks slowly turned red. "If you decide that you would, I'll be waiting for you. I'll be the guy with the microphone" he finished, fixing her with one last magnetic stare that made her heart pound, before turning to the young guy who was waiting patiently to be served.

Middie tried to tell herself that she didn't know why she came. But as she watched the tall man with the angular frame step off of the stage and make his way towards her, she knew it was useless to deny her attraction to this stranger. "You came" he stated, straddling the bar stool next to hers and leaning forward to order a scotch.

"Uh-huh" she answered, taking a hasty sip from her own drink.

"I'm glad" he said, reaching out to take the glass that had been placed before him.

Daniel swung his legs around so that he was facing the stage, and asked her about her life. She began gingerly, but once she'd started she found she couldn't stop, and she told him all about her relationship with her controlling mother, her psychic abilities which she kept secret, how upset it made her that she still couldn't contact her father in the Spirit world after all of these years and about Joe and the life they shared together.

"I never wanted a million dollar mansion or anything like that. Just...a nice home, maybe children. I just always thought that I'd have more than this by now, you know? Have...more" Middie said wistfully. "Oh God...look at me. I'm such a cliché – a forty year old woman sitting at a bar with a stranger and a drink, spilling my guts!" she laughed, a little too loudly, suddenly embarrassed. "We all have these moments. That's life" Daniel said. "Look at what's right in front of you – that's my advice. Sometimes you've just got to let go of what's not working anymore and move on". He drained his glass and stood up. "I've got another session to do. Stay?" he asked, his eyes on hers.

There was no hesitation at all in Middie's voice when she said yes, and watching his lips move with the music, all thoughts of home and Joe vanished.

"Look at that sky" Daniel exclaimed as they sat on the riverbank at the back of his flat. "I just love it when it turns that incredible colour – what's it called?"

"Midnight Blue" Middie answered. "That's my real name you know".

He turned to look at her. "What?"

Middie stared at the waxing moon and smiled. "Well, let me tell you a story..."

Midnight Blue – that was the name given to her by Charles in honour of the Midnight Blue sky he so loved and was always trying to capture in his work. Never quite satisfied with his results, he remained devoted to his quest all of his life. If Rose or Middie had ever wanted to find Charles in the evenings when the sky turned blue, they knew that he could be found outside, madly trying to

capture the scene that surrounded him.

"Beautiful, mysterious – and full of magic" Charles had answered when Middie had asked her parents what her full name meant. "The only name worthy of my most lovely girl" he'd beamed.

Middie paused, remembering the way her father's smile had lit up his whole face. "So, how come you go by Middie? Midnight Blue is such a beautiful name. Why don't you use it?" Daniel asked.

"Well..." Middie continued.

Rose had insisted that Midnight Blue was too much of a mouthful for everyday, and that Middie would do.

"And so it stuck" Middie finished.

"I see" Daniel said softly. "And does Joe call you Midnight Blue?"

"Not for years" Middie replied. "He just...stopped". She pulled her jacket more closely around her body.

"Hmm...what a fool" Daniel shook his head.

"He's not a fool!" Middie snapped. "He's just...we just...we've been together for a long time. Couples...settle."

Daniel looked thoughtful, and replied "Yes, they do. You need to start using your abilities to help others. And I'm going to call you Midnight Blue" he stated and then, pulling off his T-shirt, he walked towards the river, leaving Middie to stare at his back, a smile on her lips.

Later that night, lying in Daniel's arms, she shivered, remembering how he had kissed her naked body in the water and led her to his bed, recalling the promises of fidelity and undying love he had whispered in her ear as they had merged again and again, both struck by the powerful feelings that had ignited between them. He had seeped through her veins, drenching her until she became like the earth after weeks of flooding rains, unable to absorb any more moisture. Middie

became aware that all of the hardness that had been living within her had simply floated away.

The earth felt good under her bare feet as she crossed Daniel's lawn. It had started to shower lightly, and as she left the man who had unknowingly given her the key to her self-built fortress, Middie sighed. She still loved Joe, and it was him that she needed to see now - there was a conversation she owed him. Daniel hadn't understood why they couldn't be together when they'd fallen so deeply in love and had watched, heartbroken, as she'd walked out of his house. As she pulled into her own driveway, Joe rushed to greet her, relief washing over his countenance. Middie knew he was going to be devastated, but to return to him was impossible. Clarity had come to Middie in the night, and she knew that she needed to rediscover herself and that to do this, she needed to be alone. She was going to start her own business giving people Readings - and she would call it Midnight Blue. As she stepped out of the car, Middie felt the rain on her face and saw the sun's rays reaching through the overcast sky like a promise of the new life that would come after this emotional storm had passed. And from the corner of her eye, she saw Charles dancing merrily to the sounds of Rhapsody In Blue.