

~ Fin de Siècle ~

by fingersmith (C) 2009

Synopsis: Charly Warde's life took a plunge the day she found out her parents had died. Everything seemed to stop existing. Working in a dead end job, Charly meets a strange woman - a woman she believes is in her imagination. But is there something more to this woman than meets the eye? Could there be an element of the supernatural surrounding her? Or is Charly losing her mind?

Disclaimers: There are images, themes, and language of an adult nature. Some of which will be disturbing.

Thank you to all you people out there who have kept me wanting to write by letting me know you like what I do. Sorry I've been away so long, but I have another piece in the pipeline that will soon be finished. The next one is in the third person. Bugger.

**Take me now baby here as I am
Hold me close, try and understand
Desire is hunger is the fire I breathe
Love is a banquet on which we feed**

Patty Smith Group

I used to think about the purpose in life. Well, not just the big question, 'Why are we here?' more like 'What's the point?' I mean, what, in fact, is the point? Work? Family? Finding that special someone to spend the rest of your life with whilst still ignoring that niggling question?

'What is the point?'

The answer is simple. Life, and its purpose, has only one meaning. Death. We live to die - end of. Literally. From the moment of conception we are dying, but the worrying thing is we try to avoid it for as long as we possibly can. Why? Fuck knows. Maybe some people do have a purpose to living after all, but I never could figure it out.

Sorry. I know I sound blunt and morose, but that's how I feel, or maybe how I *used* to feel. Perhaps it would best if I put my 'life' into some kind of perspective. It might help you understand why I was such a miserable little fucker who concentrated on negatives all of the time. Once again, what is the point of me rambling on about my boring existence? It would probably depress you even more.

However, I can't really say I think that way now. It could be that I stopped asking that question because I couldn't be arsed thinking of a reply, couldn't be arsed making my brain hurt with the

process of selecting the pros and cons of living. It could be because I realised that life is in fact work related - family related - love related. Or it could be because I wasn't alive anymore.

In a sick way I have reached my goal. I was conceived, born, mumbled and grumbled through life, and then died. I could even mention my first steps, the starting of school, the proud looks from my parents as I graduated University, but then I would have to counterbalance them with the horrific things too. The feelings of inadequacy, the loss of my loving family, the grief that rocked my world and then made me question the meaning of life in the first place. Losing someone you love is a rite of passage, or so some wanker told me. Rites of passage come in the form of birth, marriage, and then death; there is no mention that you have to die internally time and time again every time your heart metaphorically and literally breaks.

When I gasped my last breath I was thirty three - almost a religious cliché. However, I was far from a martyr, and far from pure. Four and a half years had passed since my parents had died, and from the moment I found out they had died peacefully in their beds whilst inhaling carbon monoxide, it was as if I had inhaled it too. Work, as I realised, wasn't the be all and end all of my existence, as finding out your parents are dead puts that into perspective. Family - what family? I had no one else. A special someone? Who? Me? The women who had ignored me over the years? What would a good woman want with a no hoper like me?

Well, that's what I thought. And it's amazing what things can go through a mind that is constantly vacuous apart from images of a hand guiding to it oblivion. But, I have to admit, dying was a lot better than living. Why? Once again, simple. And the answer - dying gave me the reason to live in the first place. I know. Fucked up.

Working in a bar wasn't really in my career plan. I left Uni with dreams of changing the world, as most pimply faced students do. I wanted to save lives, do voluntary work in third world countries, nurse dying babies back to health, feed the starving, find a cure for cancer, anything that would allow me to make a difference. But I didn't. Instead I became a social worker. Not a bad profession, by all accounts. Social workers do save lives, do give dying babies a chance, help feed the hungry, and can help people with cancer get the care they need. Not the waste lands of an African desert, but at least it was a start.

But that stopped. Obviously.

So, back to the bar.

It was more like a club than a bar, as it happens. More like a den of iniquity, if truth be told. Before I lost everything, there would have been no way on earth I would have ventured inside such a place, but I had got to the stage where I thought it was all I was worth. And the tips weren't bad either. I worked every evening shift, and unlike most of the other people who worked there, I didn't drink. You would have thought I would have been lacquered every night, wouldn't you? People say, or the pissheads did anyway, that it was a good way for them to forget the pain they were feeling. But I didn't want to forget it - I wanted to glorify in every stab, of

every grip of loss my body had to give.

Being in the dark of the club helped me to fade away into nothingness and still get paid. Even if you are suicidal you still have to pay the bills, eat, and sleep with a roof over your head, don't you? Well, no you don't, actually, but I hadn't reached the stage where I avoided bathing or needing the essentials in life. Maybe it was because I was just programmed to pay bills, eat, and sleep under a roof - in retrospect, I was even crap at being suicidal.

Then it happened. Not death. Don't rush me, its coming. This happening was something other than death, for a change. It was almost like a spark had ignited within, and for the first time in a long time I believed my heart had another purpose than to ache. Blood, my blood, seemed to heat up and charge around my body. It wasn't a case of feeling it; I could hear it, too, almost thundering inside my head like a blast beat of a drum. I was standing with my back to the room sorting through my receipts for the evening, and believe me when I tell you, I nearly passed out. Instead of keeling over with my hands gripped to my head, I turned. Initially I thought it was my imagination, but then realised I didn't have one. In the corner of the room, just out of my jurisdiction, was a figure. I couldn't see the contours of the face, just a shape, but I could have sworn it was female. Even though the table wasn't one I worked, I had an urge to go over and see who was there. However, my legs adamantly refused to work and I just stood there like a twat waiting for something to happen. Although I couldn't see the person's face, I knew she was looking at me. Don't ask me how, I just knew. Instead of feeling totally creeped out, I just felt even more intrigued, and eventually felt my left foot move forward. Before I had the chance to see how the right foot would react to the movement, Tina, the waitress who worked the darkened area, moved in front of me.

'You ok, Charly?' Brown eyes looked sympathetically into mine, and I knew she thought I was going into one of my many downers. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

Licking my lips, I tried to answer her, failed, so licked them again before spluttering, 'You have a punter on table thirty one.'

Turning away from me, Tina looked over to the corner where the female figure had been. 'Where?' I tried to look past her, but her bad perm got in the way. 'Table thirty one is empty.' As soon as the words came out of her mouth, I felt the blood begin to slow in my body. Pushing her out of the way, I attempted to raise my hand and point at the table she should have been looking at. However, my hand seemed to freeze half way up as I noticed that the table in question was just as she had described it. Empty.

'But ... that ... there was ...' There was no way the person who had been seated there could have got past us both without being seen. The table backed into an alcove, and the woman would have had to move out of that, around the fake pillar, and side step into my field of vision to make her escape.

'You had a snifter?' The humour in her voice was annoying, and part of me wanted to tell her to fuck off. However, I just shook my head, turned back to the bar, and started to pretend to look through my receipts again. I distinctly heard her mutter as she moved away, 'You should try it

sometime. Maybe you'd lighten up.'

But lightening up was the last thing on my mind at that moment. I honestly believed I had just seen the Grim Reaper herself, then began to wonder if someone had slipped something into my drink.

Grim Reaper. As if! Didn't that role come with a scythe and morbid music? The music pumping in the club was as far removed from morbid as morbid gets - a more apt description would be shite. Repetitive shite at that. And if that was any indication where I would end up, I knew I was actually in a living hell already. However, that didn't stop the niggling feeling coursing through me. How had the woman moved without either of us seeing her? Was I slowly losing my mind? Well, even more slowly than I had been losing it already?

A week passed. I didn't notice. Although the reason I knew it was a week was because of what happened, and I also because I did the maths afterwards. The night had been slow. Punters were staying at home because the weather wasn't much cop. England and bad weather seem to go hand in hand, and, the majority of the time, people just got on with it and got wet, or cold, or wet and cold. But not that night. That night most of them stayed home, probably in the hub of their family whom they ignored when the weather was dry. Pity they didn't realise what a gift they had.

I'm not saying the club was dead, there were still a fair few regulars propping up the bar and trying to cop a feel when they had the chance. There were couples hiding in the booths that reinforced the outer perimeter, and that was where most of my energies lay - getting orders from people who just wanted a place to grope another warm body. It suited me fine, though. They were more prone to tip when they wanted you to fuck off quicker.

It was nearing midnight when I felt it again. My blood giddy up, I mean. Looking over my shoulder, I noticed a figure seated at the same table it had the previous time it was here. Once again, I could make out the facial features, and once again I felt as if I was going to pass out. But if I passed out, would I ever know if I was imagining it? Imagining her? I knew I had to make my way over to table thirty one and see the shadow up close and personal even if that particular table wasn't on my circuit.

Checking over at the bar, I smiled inwardly as I noticed Tina rubbing herself against a client in the hopes of getting laid, or failing that, getting a good tip. I didn't care if she kicked off because I was working her claim - she could have the receipt - and the tip, if there was one. I wasn't doing it for the money, more out of interest - or, more likely, for my mental health.

Have you ever noticed how slowly it seems to be to get from A to B? Scratch that. Let's try again. Have you ever noticed how painstakingly sluggish your body is when you want to get to a place quickly? Or how it seems to race towards its doom when you want things to slow so you can absorb the moment? I wish I could put my journey into either category just to appease you. But, in all honesty, I couldn't tell you how I got there. One minute I was considering needing

help to move, as the blood just wouldn't stop blasting through my head, and my legs were jittering wildly because of all the electricity pulsing through them. The next, I was standing in the alcove that housed table thirty one and staring into what I can only describe as intense. Maybe it was because I could see the piercing blueness of eyes seemingly rooting me to the spot that makes me want to stick with the word intense. Who knows? I sure as hell didn't. I didn't know anything apart from that blue that seemed almost translucent in the darkened corner of a flea bitten club.

A soft cough broke through my stupidity, and I felt my gaze break away from eyes to digest the rest of the woman's face. A pale face. A strong chiselled face. A beautiful and captivating face that seemed as if it didn't belong in a place like this - didn't belong to the human race at all. And this face was leaning closer to mine, leaning close enough that I should have felt her breath on my skin. Dazed, I watched as her claret lips moved as if to speak, and I felt the air catch in my throat so it didn't mar the sound of her voice.

'Good evening ...' The full dulcet timbre of her words seemed to penetrate more than just my ears. Like a simpleton, I was so wrapped up in her that I momentarily missed the intonation of pausing. It appeared she wanted me to say my name, although God knows how I worked that out.

'Charly.'

A smile slipped effortlessly across her lips, and as she parted those perfect transitions from skin to inner membrane, I saw straight brilliant white teeth. Sitting back slightly, the smile shortened. 'Char ... ly? As in *Charlotte*?' I nodded, and watched with fascination as the smile opened up once again. 'Well then, *Charlotte*. What can you offer me tonight?' Numerous answers flooded through my mind, none of which were a drink. A laugh broke free from her, a laugh that was deep yet light. 'Maybe I should rephrase my question.' Once again, she leaned forward. 'Do you have wine?' I nodded again, mimicking perfectly the mute village idiot. 'Then I shall have wine. Red.' Was I being dismissed? Watching her slouch back into the booth, I realised the conversation and banter was over and I should get my arse into gear and get her order.

It wasn't until I found myself standing at the bar did I realise something. All the time I had been in the woman's company, I hadn't felt like curling up into a ball and wishing my life away like I had done for the last four and half years. Then I realised something else. The pulsating pump of my blood in my ears had gone, allowing me to actually hear the shite music once again. Sharply, I turned in the direction of table thirty one only to realise that unlike minutes ago, the table was empty. And like that table, it wasn't long before I was experiencing the same effect. Emptiness. However this time, the emptiness was different than before. Now it wasn't just because I had spent every waking moment feeling blank since the death of my parents - it was because the woman who'd been seated at that table had made me feel as if I actually had some purpose in this world after all.

This should have made me seem happier, shouldn't it? But no. Now I was considering if the woman I had spoken to had actually been a psychotic hallucination brought on by grief. But, funnily enough, there was a flaw in this thesis. If I were to hallucinate to cover my slipping mental state and grasping misery, wouldn't I have visions of my mother? My father? My

anything but a dark haired beautiful woman with soft red lips and captivating blue eyes?

Looks as if the answer is no.

For the rest of the night I felt disturbed, something that I believed I was used to. But this time it was different. It wasn't a case of believing I was losing the plot, more of wanting the losing of the aforementioned plot to continue. At least when I was conjuring up dark haired beauties from my dormant imagination, I could feel normal. Yes. I know that doesn't make sense, but what else did I have?

By the time my shift ended I was ready to go home. After the incident with the Magnificent Disappearing Woman, I was drained and ready to slump into bed and wish for a night without dreaming. I hated dreaming. You would too if you had the kind of dreams I had. They weren't full of puppy dogs playing or birds singing - my dreams, like my life, were black. Therefore, you can understand why I wanted to slip under the duvet, close my eyes, and then wake up the next day with no memory of the hours in between.

As usual I was the first to leave. I didn't want to hang about for the afterhour's drinks - that would be sociable, and I didn't do sociable. Especially when Tina had collared the bloke she had been half molesting all night. Thoughts of how their evening would pan out drifted through my head and I felt my stomach roil. Imagining the badly permed waitress in a passionate embrace with the man with the missing teeth was more than I could handle.

Leaving the club, I felt the chill of the autumn air whip across my face, my blonde hair circling like a pseudo halo. Pulling the collar up of my jacket, I nestled my chin under the rim. My house was fifteen minutes walk away from the bar, and although I knew it was stupid to walk home at gone one in the morning alone, I didn't give a shit. If someone decided that I was prey, then prey I was. What did I care? Whatever a faceless wonder wanted to do would happen whether I was prepared or not. Maybe, deep down, I actually wanted something to happen. I don't mean rape, although that would more than likely be the case. I mean, someone sneaking up behind and putting me out of my misery. Thunk. A blunt object at the back of my head. Slish. A sharp blade across the throat. I could go on, but I think you get the message by now.

It's so easy to be brave when you have nothing to be scared about. False bravado I think they call it. Believing I was ready for something brutal and violent to happen seemed so much easier to swallow when I was full of self pity. But when it actually comes down to it, I doubt I would have been so ambivalent. The reason why I can say this as an afterthought to being the uncaring woman of the previous paragraph is this. Something did happen. Well, when I say something, I mean - *something*. In other words, I couldn't really tell you. It was more a sensation, a feeling, an instinctual reaction to a presence around me. A psychiatrist would call it a reaction to my inner longings, inner fears, inner voice. However, a person without their head in a book, or up their backside, would say it was me being paranoid.

I think I should explain a little more about what happened, and maybe you can either be a normal

everyday kind of Joe, or you can go along the route of the shrink. I'm sticking with 'I was shitting my pants', as I think that sums it up perfectly, although tells you fuck all. Ok. Here goes. I left the bar, pulled my collar up, and noticed an angel halo-y thing happening around my head. A thought of sitting in a warm car and driving home briefly popped inside my mind, but I pulled a face, acted like I didn't care, and started to move in the direction of home. No one was around - not even a stray cat to meow manically into the darkness. The streets were empty, house lights were off, and each and every footstep I made sounded hollow and heavy, a bit like how I was feeling. I had been walking for about five minutes when I felt a sensation race through me. It was as if someone was watching me - either from behind or ahead - from my left or my right - but watching me all the same. Furtively I looked around, but as you can gather, there was nothing, or no one, there. A small voice inside my head reminded me that rapists and killers usually don't stand under neon signs announcing that you were going to be their next victim, and that made my steps quicken.

Turning into the next road, I thought I saw something dart into a side passage, but the shadow moved so quickly I couldn't be sure if I had imagined it or not. Without slowing my pace, I sharply turned again and decided I would take another route, although it would add a few more minutes onto my journey. At least I would get home in one piece. A niggling thought crept inside my head, 'Why don't you go back to the bar and call for a taxi?' But like an idiot, I ignored it, preferring to just keep going.

A few more minutes passed, and I felt the same sensation again, like I was being watched, I mean. Fear was angling for centre stage, and I knew a small part of me was deliberating screaming out for help. However, if someone did come to my rescue, what could I tell them I needed rescuing from? A bad case of the jitters? Fear of the dark? Nope. I had to keep going and hope that the screaming damsel in distress part of me stayed mute.

I quickened my pace. My heart was thundering inside my chest, and the blood was pumping around me like it was gasoline. I could feel a sheen of sweat coat my body, and the coldness I had previously experienced upon leaving the club seemed to evaporate. Muttering under my breath, 'Ladies perspire - horses sweat, Charly' brought an unexpected smile to my face. My mother had always corrected me when I was a teenager for saying I was sweaty, as she tried valiantly to make me sound more graceful. For a fleeting moment I felt her close to me, and that closeness made me feel just how I used to. Happy, loved, contented. Then it went, and I was left feeling the loss of her all over again.

Eventually, I entered the street where I lived. I think it actually took me less time to get there, as I had been nearly running for the last few blocks. Unlike before when I believed there could be someone watching me, now I knew for certain that someone was in the darkness around me. Street lights did nothing to aid my vision, although I was still glad they were lit.

Now. Here's the weird thing I was telling you about - the *something* I couldn't really explain earlier. It really wasn't to do with the being invisibly stalked, or seeing shadows dart into passageways, although you would think that was a huge factor. The *something* was more concrete than that. It was a word. A softly spoken word as I lifted my key to the lock of my front door. The word was familiar, as it should be.

'Charlotte.'

What the fuck? Who? Where? Get inside you moron.

'Charlotte.'

Again, the disembodied voice came out of the blackness of the street, and my hand was shaking so much I had difficulty slipping the metal into the hole. Clunk. Turn. Open. And there I stood in the doorway to my house staring out into a deserted street looking for a source of the voice. Weirdly, I didn't need to see it, as I knew who it was. There was no way there was anyone else on earth that had the full dulcet timbre like she did. There was no one on earth who had ever spoken my name with such intensity. It was such a pity that I was beginning to believe that in fact there actually was no one on earth like her, as she was a figment of my imagination. Funny thing is I had always believed I didn't have one.

At that moment I knew that even though I had wished for a dreamless night, I wouldn't get it. Stepping backwards, I slowly closed the door onto the outside world. Hearing the click of the latch made my heart beat decrease slightly, and after putting the chain across, I began to calm down. Wiping my hand over my mouth, I felt the sweat cling to my fingers. Although I thought I wanted to shut out the voice, shut out the image of the woman from earlier in the evening, deep down I didn't. Even if it meant I was actually losing my mind.

I was right. I did dream. But this time the dreams didn't take the shape of seeing my parents' cold bodies stretched out side by side. To say they were bad dreams would be lying, but I can't honestly say they were full of joy either. Mainly they were full of flashes of things from different scenarios, scenarios I hadn't yet experienced but felt like I had. Maybe you are thinking they sound just like average dreams, and I wish I could agree with you, but they were not run of the mill imaginings. It seemed as if they were lit with red flashes, black and red flashes. Someone else was in them. A woman. A dark haired, pale faced woman with astonishingly blue eyes and a voice of velvet. All she seemed to say was my name over and over again, and every time I reached out for her, she seemed to slip back into the darkness once again.

In my dreams I felt heat. Heat from my body, heat from places I hadn't felt any heat from in such a long time that upon waking I struggled to match the feeling with a natural reaction. Moments passed before I realised I was sexually aroused. Moving my legs, I felt a dampness slip across my inner thigh.

'Fuck!' No. There would be none of that tonight. Turning over, I pulled the cover back over myself and tried to nestle further into the pillows. I didn't want to touch myself, as that would be giving in to pleasure. But it seemed my starved body had other ideas, as it still throbbed with the memory of want. I turned in the opposite direction hoping that would quell some of the aching. No such luck, as the sensation just became more acute. Clamping my eyes shut, I willed images of mundane objects and situations into my mind, hoping they would put an end to feeling as if I

would lose the urge for *the urge* to slip my willing fingers beneath the band of my sleeping shorts.

Nope. Images of politicians delivering boring speeches did nothing to stop any of the need that was quickly consuming me. Before I knew I had done it, I felt the tell tale brush of my fingers tracing their wicked way amongst the downy hair of my innocence. It felt good, strange, but good. My nails began to softly scratch at the skin underneath, and I released a soft sigh into the dark room. Slowly, I turned over onto my back, my legs separating instinctively. The band of my shorts decided to tighten around my wrist, and with my free hand I quickly pushed them down my thighs, over my knees, and onto the waiting mattress. In the process, my legs had lifted, allowing my fingers to slip further into the pot of desire that was pooling in anticipation. Leisurely, I stroked around the area of my craving, purposefully avoiding any direct contact with the slickness I knew would be waiting for me.

Closing my eyes, I tried to conjure the blue eyed woman from the bar. If I was going down this route, then so was she. I knew I couldn't do this alone, and she had been the one to initiate this process in the first place. It wasn't the dreams that had done this; this want had started ever since I had stood at the table beside her in the bar; it had started as soon as she had opened her mouth to say my name with such delicacy and intensity. Almost instantly, blue eyes hovered before my own, a red mouth curved in to a lascivious smile, bright teeth flashing as the eyes turned hungry for what I wanted to give.

Down. My fingers were edging down, and down, and down. Warm liquid met them, warm liquid guided and invited them to partake of the drink they needed. Invitation accepted. Tentatively, I circled my opening, once, twice, three times, before pushing the tip inside. I felt the walls tighten around it as if it was a welcome invader, and a slow smile slipped across my face. It had been so long since I had felt any spark of arousal, any trace of sexual need, but now it seemed as if I needed this to make me whole- make me feel alive again.

BAM! Something outside in the street clanked to the ground making my eyes fly open. The room was softly lit by the streetlight edging its way through the chink in my curtain, only to land haphazardly across my tumbled covers. Strange. I knew I had closed them properly before I had climbed into bed, as I hated light in the room when I slept. Another strange thing. When I had awoken from my dreams, there had been no light in the room.

Looking down, I saw my hand frozen in place. Watching the skin appear yellow in the fake light brought me back to some semblance of reality. Here I was, just about to alleviate a desire conjured by a dream situation, magicked by an illusion in a bar, invoked by an aural hallucination on my way home.

'Fuck!' Once again, not tonight. I couldn't continue with self gratification - not now. Not now that I knew that as soon as it was all over, I would feel even emptier than I had beforehand. Slipping my finger free, I wiped my desire onto the sheet before reaching down and retrieving my shorts.

After dressing, I once again lifted the duvet up and pressed my head into the pillows. Minutes passed. More minutes passed. And then I threw the covers off me, swung my legs over the side

of the bed, and stood up. Making my way over to the curtains, I grabbed one in each hand. As I pulled them back, I stopped. There, standing brazenly in the street, was the woman from the club. Her face was turned upwards, her eyes pinning me with a stare so powerful I felt my legs quiver slightly. It was if our eyes locked for what appeared to be an age. I couldn't turn away, couldn't break the contact - didn't *want* to break the contact. Everything seemed to fade into nothingness; there was her and me, me and her. The breaths I released were ragged, almost painful, as they ripped free and landed on the window separating us. A smile slipped across her face, but it wasn't in recognition. It was animal, powerful, savage, yet safe. Slowly, step by step, she moved backwards, her eyes still rooting me to the spot.

Then she was gone, and I was left standing in the window of my bedroom, gripping the curtains, and questioning my mental state. It seemed as if I was rapidly falling through the trapdoor of insanity. There had been no way the woman had been real - no way could she know where I lived, what room I slept in. No way could she have known I would come to the window to see her standing there captivating me with those extraordinary eyes and that inviting hungry smile. Obviously it was something happening within me. I had brought her image here, brought her presence to comfort me, guide me, love me, save me somehow.

But how can a person be saved by a figment of the mind?

The rest of the night passed. In the morning, in the brightness of the stark white sun, the previous evening's events seemed to fade and slip into the file in my brain labelled 'Madness'. But that didn't stop the want inside me slowly burning away. Routine jobs filled my day until once again I was ready to go to work. However much I believed that nothing had actually happened, it didn't stop me taking my car instead of walking into work like I usually did.

All night in the bar I kept looking at table thirty one, but it remained empty. Other people noticed that I seemed distracted, as I missed orders, missed conversation, missed being a part of the life I really didn't care that I was missing. Once again, as soon as my shift came to an end, I was out of there and home within minutes. There had been no feeling of being watched, no feeling of a presence, even when I was standing at my front door, key in hand, waiting for my name to be spoken into the cold air.

Sleep came quickly. No images flashed in my brain making me want to take my sexually dormancy into the world of the living like I had the previous evening.

Upon waking, I felt a sense of disappointment trickle through me. It seemed as if, for some fucked up reason, I had been stood up. Many times I had wished for a dreamless night, but as soon as I got what I wanted, I felt cheated somehow.

The day panned out the same as the day before; panned out the same as it always did. Jobs to occupy my non-working life, and then work to fill the rest of the hours. My life was circular - round and round and round it spun, filling itself with moments to lessen the dullness of existing. That was all I had known for so long, that before now I hadn't bothered to question it. So, why

was I thinking of it now? Why was I questioning something that was part and parcel of my life for the last four and a half years? And, more to the point, why was I feeling disappointed that my imaginary woman hadn't stalked me the previous evening? Loneliness? But I wanted to be lonely, wanted nothing and no one to invade my life and make me feel again. When you allowed yourself to open up and accept love, didn't that also open up the chance of getting hurt all over again?

Three days passed in the same way. Three days and nights. By the time it came to the fourth day, I had started to believe that what had happened must have been what I had thought it had been in the first place. A hallucination. But then it happened again. The feeling. The racing of blood in my head, the feeling of weakness joined with a sensation that sparked life within me. Once again, I was at work, but this time table thirty one was on my shift, as Tina had not come to work. She hadn't even bothered to call in, just not turned up. That was so unlike the frizzy haired waitress, as she always came into work. Her life was nearly as bleak as mine, although she filled it up with one night stands and alcohol. No one cared enough to call to see if she was ok, although a voice inside me had told me to pick up the phone and check. Must've been part of my social worker training.

But, I was too busy. Too busy to take time out of trying to work two circuits to stop for a minute and see if the woman I had been working with for over two years was in fact alive. A part of me still feels guilty about that, nevertheless that is in the past now. It also didn't help that I felt as if I was being watched - felt as if at any given moment my legs would give way - felt as if my head would explode, leaving my neck pumping out blood onto the floor of the dimly lit club.

When I turned and saw the familiar outline of the woman seated at her usual table, I wanted to ask someone else if they could see her. Wanted clarification that my mind was not playing tricks on me, that my brain wasn't making me believe I could see the woman who kept on invading my thoughts over and over again. But I couldn't. Not because of feeling stupid; it was because I physically couldn't. My mouth opened, my arm gestured, but nothing came out. It was as if I had been struck dumb, like I couldn't speak about her for some fucked up reason. Before I knew it I was standing beside her table once more.

Eyes, that had seemed so intensely blue the previous time I had stood in the same spot, seemed different. They seemed softer, lighter, calmer, and more welcoming. Electricity raced through me, and I felt that if I touched her I would blow the bar into smithereens with the force of connection.

'Good evening, *Charlotte*.' The sound of her voice thumped inside my chest, and I knew this was more than attraction. It was almost as if I had been enchanted by some character in a fairytale and was completely under a spell. 'How're you tonight?' Trying valiantly to gain some semblance of control, I lifted my order pad and attempted to seem calm. My hands were shaking so much that the pen quivered on the page making a zig zag line. Coolness cupped my fingers, instantly followed by the heat racing from me and into her. She had tried to stop my hand from spasming erratically, and, weirdly enough, it had worked. Glancing quickly at her face, I noted a reassuring smile cross those beautiful red lips. This woman was stunning - more than stunning, in fact. In all my sad little life I had never seen such exquisiteness. Closing my eyes I tried to make my brain

acknowledge that this was not happening - that this scenario was one I had brought up to make me feel as if there was something in my life to care about. It wasn't working, though. It couldn't work whilst her hand was still holding mine. It was solid, cold, yet solid. It was real - it had to be. Hallucinations didn't come with physical connection, did they? Aural and visual, yes. But contact? 'Here. Sit.'

I had no choice but to sit down next to her. It wasn't just because she had pulled me inside the darkened booth, either. It was either sit down or fall down, and I had made a big enough fool of myself already.

Minutes passed. I was garnering the courage to open my eyes, as I believed as soon as I did she would be gone and I would be left feeling a coldness on my hand with no figure to accompany it.

'Are you ok?' Her voice. That voice. The feeling it evoked. God. I didn't want it to go - didn't want to open my eyes and see my life empty once again. I wanted to sit here and bathe in it - sit here and bask in the knowledge that for a few brief moments I felt part of the human race. But I couldn't just sit here with my eyes closed, either. I also needed to look into those blue eyes again.

Slowly, I allowed my lids to ease open, the darkness of the room surrounding me momentarily leaving me blind. Turning, I focused on a face that had previously been controlled, only to see concern waiting for me. Her lips were parted in readiness to ask once again if I was feeling ok, and I wanted to reassure her that at that precise moment I felt very much alive. Sitting next to her seemed the most natural thing in the world, if it was natural at all. Deep down inside I was still questioning the existence of the beauty seated next to me. Not just because she kept on fading into nothing the previous times I had seen her - it was as if such magnificence could actually be real in the first place.

'Charly! For fuck's sake! People are waiting!' My boss's voice rang out above the music, making me nervously shift in my seat.

'You need to go.' It wasn't a dismissal like the time before; it was more like a guiding away. 'If you get the time, I'll have a wine.'

'Red.' A statement from my muteness. A nod to accompany it, and I was up and away, swallowing dramatically as if I needed all the air I could muster.

It was ten minutes later that I actually got to take her drink back over to the table, part of which was spent trying to catch up on what I had missed, whilst another part was trying to control my heart rate. Part of me expected to see the seat empty again, but she was there. Waiting. I couldn't even look into her face, as I knew she was expecting something more than the glass to be slipped over the table and towards her, shortly to be followed by the bill. I knew that if I looked at her, I would be in the exact situation as was in before. Stupid and paralysed. Even I knew that was not the way to act when you were trying to impress someone. It didn't stop the feelings she evoked in me coming into play. The only way I can describe it is like being hypnotised - under water. Yes, I know that doesn't make sense, but did you really expect it to?

Twenty minutes passed, and she was still there. The glass of red wine still sat in the place where I had left it, so there was no reason for me to go over and ask if she needed a refill. Time was moving closer to me leaving the bar, and I was beginning to wonder whether the woman at table thirty one was waiting for me to get off work. Anticipation, followed by fear, then excitement chased each other around inside me. Did I want her to wait for me? Could I allow her to take me home? Should I allow someone into my life, the same life I had shut off to everybody else for God knows how long?

'Look, Charly.' Sam, my boss, leaned over the bar. 'I appreciate you covering for Tina, but ...' He shook his head slightly, picked up a glass and began to wipe it over with a cloth. 'If it's getting too much, I'll ask Shirl to take some off you.' Frowning, I began to ask what he meant, but like usual, Sam didn't listen to anything but the sound of his own voice, or the sound of the cash register pinging open. 'I mean ... how long did you sit at that table over there on your own? I know you deserve a break ...'

On my own? What the fuck?

'On my own. What the fuck, Sam? I was talking to a punter.' I tried to sound indignant, but I couldn't help the slight tremble that was coming through. 'I thought you wanted us to socialise.'

A snort left his mouth, just before he eyed me up and down. 'You don't do sociable.' I stepped forward, the anger blazing up from nowhere. 'Hey! Calm down, kid. Don't take it the wrong way.' How else was I supposed to take it? 'All I'm saying is I know you deserve a break, but don't do it when we're heaving, ok?'

Gritting my teeth, I almost spat the words at him. 'I was talking to a customer.' Yanking out my pad, I checked through the stubs until I found her order. Slamming my book on the counter, I pointed. 'A red wine. Table thirty one. Time - eleven fifteen.'

Standing straight, Sam looked me squarely in the face, the half grin gone and replaced by a mean line. 'And where's the money? Better still. Where's the customer?'

It felt as if a rock hit my stomach. I knew that if I turned around she wouldn't be there, and I would be left looking like a dick in front of my employer. Yes - I know it was a shit job, but don't you remember me telling you I liked to actually pay my bills? It was one thing to be a miserable fucker, as long as you were a good worker - but to be a miserable fucker and screw up your job - that was an entirely different kettle of fish.

Sure enough, upon turning I was greeted by nothing. No woman was seated at the table in question, and by the shape of the glass waiting there, the wine was still in the exact position I had placed it. I also knew it would be untouched, most probably because I had imagined the whole thing.

Instead of backing down and telling Sam that I must've got the wrong table, or I felt I had needed a break at that time, I almost sneered at him before announcing I was going to collect the money.

Pushing away from the bar I heard him snigger just like the twat he was. I wanted to claim the wine from the table and go back and turf it all over him before telling him to shove his job up his grimy money grabbing arse. But even I knew the insult didn't make any sense, so I just made my way to the empty table to collect the glass and then slip in my own money to cover the cost.

Strangely, the receipt had moved from where I had placed it. Sitting pride of place on top of the white paper was a twenty pound note. Underneath the money, I noticed something else. A business card with something scrawled over it. 'You *will* see me again. H.' And probably only me if my track record was going to continue. Turning the card over, I saw something that made my heart speed up just a little more. *Helena Michaels. Business Consultant.* At least now I knew her name. Lifting the money, I slipped it in my pouch before returning my attention back to the card. It took me a few moments to understand why it seemed odd, and then it hit me. Didn't a business card usually have contact details on it? There were no phone numbers, no email, no fax, no nothing apart from name and rank. It was almost as if it was a 'Don't call me, I'll call you.' And I think this broached into her private life, also.

Slipping the card into my back pocket, I made my way back to the bar, the twenty pound note gripped firmly in my hand. I knew Sam would still believe I had put the money in myself, but at least I had the evidence I needed to make me begin to believe I wasn't losing the plot quite as much as I thought I was.

It had been a long time since I had felt any excitement about anything. And to think the reason I was feeling this nearly forgotten emotion was because I was going into work seemed even crazier. But it wasn't just about going into work - it was that maybe I would get the opportunity to see the beautiful dark haired woman again. I had even taken a little more time over my appearance, making sure my hair was done, and even a touch of makeup to add to the mix. Even when I found out Tina had not turned up again, and I would be working two circuits, it didn't dampen my mood. Actually, it heightened it. At least when I got Tina's round I had table thirty one.

For the first time in quite a while someone else was seated there. A group of someones, actually. I wanted to tell them they had to move as the table was reserved for another party, but in the place I worked, there was no such thing as saving a table for a customer. It had always been a first come first served kind of joint. Also, it shouldn't have mattered if that certain table was taken; it wasn't as if she couldn't sit somewhere else. But as the night progressed, and the blokes who had stolen her spot became rowdier, I became more annoyed. In my fucked up little brain I was beginning to think they were putting her off, and it took all my will power not to tell them to fuck off. Alas, there were six of them and only one of me, so I put the figurative sock in my mouth and got on with working.

By the end of my shift all the excitement I had felt at the beginning of the night had evaporated, and I was left feeling deflated. It wasn't just because I had spent the last few hours avoiding being felt up, or having to get a bouncer to physically remove one ardent admirer, it was because Helena Michaels had decided that it wasn't that night she would be visiting me again. So, I left.

To top things off my car decided tonight would be the night it would piss me off even more than I was already. After countless attempts to get it started, and numerous swear words peppering the air, I climbed out and slammed the door as hard as I could. Then opened it once again, took out my coat, and slammed it with as much force as I could gather. The echo of the metal hitting the slot ricocheted through the darkened street and bounced back into my ears. Instead of calling for a taxi, I decided that I would brave the walk once again, as I hadn't done so since I had been freaked out the last time I had walked home.

I had been walking for over five minutes when I felt a presence near me. It was different to the last time I had been in this situation, as the presence was definitely ahead of me. Muttering to myself, I continued to move in the direction of home. Nothing had happened last time, had it? I had got home safe and sound, hadn't I? Well, apart from hearing my name whispered into the air, granted, but I'd got home in one piece.

However, after walking a little further, I began to become more aware that I was being watched - or should I say assessed? The turning to my street was just ahead, and I knew if I started to run I would be home in less than five minutes, but I also knew that if I did make a break for it and race off, the person who was ahead of me would know I knew they were there. The difference this made would be that I would have the upper hand - they would think I was oblivious, but I would be ready and waiting. All I had to find out now was what, in fact, I was ready and waiting for.

I didn't have to wait long. Unfortunately. Deep down I had been hoping that Ms Michaels had decided to wait for me like she had done before, but this wasn't the case. Just as I reached the top of the passageway that ran down the backs of the houses, he stepped out of the shadows, his grin huge and predatory.

'Hello there, Blondie. Sorry I had to leave so suddenly.' It was the bloke from the bar - the one the bouncer had turfed out because he was becoming over familiar with the staff. When I say staff, I mean me, and over familiar in this context means grabbing my arse, trying to drag me over his lap so he could grope me even more fully, and trying to kiss me with his sticky wet mouth. 'Thought we could carry on from where we left off.' He moved closer, and I could smell the sweat on him that alerted me he hadn't bathed in a while. That mixed with the stale smell of beer and cigarettes was not the most appetising combination. I tried to side step, but he blocked my path. I moved into the road, but he almost danced in my way. When I felt his hand grab my arm, I opened my mouth to scream. But, like all rapists, he had anticipated this, and slammed his other hand over my face.

Obviously, I struggled, and obviously he held me like a cat holds a mouse. I had been trapped, and was now being dragged into the darkness of the alleyway. All the lessons I had learned about escaping an attacker raced through my mind, and I frantically kicked his shins, threw my head back, bit his palm, but he still held on. He was strong. I wasn't. He was prepared, and I had been too pig headed to take a taxi home, leaving me in the 'Not So Prepared' category.

Slam. My back hit the wall and my front was covered by a toned body. He was taller than me, but he crouched just a little so he could stare into my face. His eyes seemed to sparkle with his

intentions, and I knew at that precise moment that I was going to be raped. My stomach churned not only with the thought of it, but also with the smell of his breath on my face.

A thin mouth curved cruelly, and I knew it was his attempt at a smile. 'Time to take what's mine.' Moving his hand away, he replaced it with his mouth. Spit covered my lips, and I clamped them shut even harder. This didn't deter him, just made him seem more determined to break me. Hips were pushing into mine and I could feel the hardness of his dick press into my stomach. I started struggling, but he just laughed and attempted to kiss me again. Thunk. My head connected with his nose before slamming back onto the brick wall behind. Blackness flitted in front of my eyes, and I believed I was going to pass out, but hearing the anger in his voice - after I had moved his nose in a direction it wasn't used to - made me try to stay with it. 'Fuck-ing - prick - tease.' In one fluid movement, my coat was open, in another my top was torn away at the front, exposing my bra to the night air and his eyes. A calloused hand grabbed for my left breast, squeezing it almost as tightly as I was squeezing my eyes closed. If this was going to happen, I didn't want to remember the images. He could do what he liked, but I didn't want to remember his face as he came - didn't want to remember his face as he entered me - as he fucked me - as he took away from me the only thing I had left.

Breathing, his breathing, was getting harder, and by the feeling pressing against me, so was his dick. My belt was open, and so were my jeans. At this precise moment they were being pushed down my legs. I had stopped struggling by now, as I had come to terms with my fate. For as long as it took him, I wasn't me anymore. I was a vessel. Something for him to release himself into and then leave in a heap on the ground in the darkness of an empty passageway. My underwear ripped away, and I felt the sting of it on my skin.

'Good girl.' His voice was thick, full, dead to me. 'Let me show you what a real man feels like.' His breaths were ragged, rampant, revolting. 'Open for me ... come on, baby. I know you want it.' Thick fingers pushed against my thighs trying to prise them apart. I knew as soon as they were open, I would feel penetration. There was no other way. Rub. Rub. Rub. The tip of his penis was trying to find entrance, trying to force itself inside me. Tears were eking past eyelids to travel down my cheeks, and all I could think about was, 'He is holding both of my hands - I can't wipe them away.'

It was there. Waiting to push. Waiting to claim, and rip, and fuck me senseless. But it didn't happen. He seemed to freeze - seemed to change his mind. The breathing paused, harrumphed, and then everything seemed to lighten. You know when you have a gnat land on your arm and you flick it away with such ease? That's exactly the sensation I had. Flick. Gone. I couldn't feel him holding me anymore. Couldn't smell his sweat; couldn't smell his stale breath. Cold air seemed to hit me from all directions, and my legs decided they couldn't hold me up anymore.

But I still couldn't open my eyes. Mainly because I believed if I did open them he would be standing above me, grinning, his penis hard, and waiting to continue with the torture he wanted to inflict.

I don't know how long I sat there. Don't know how long I exposed my body to the darkness. I was just waiting for it all to start over again.

Considering all I had been through, you would think that when I felt fingers touching the side of my face I would have screamed, wouldn't you? But I didn't. I just allowed them access. Allowed these cool fingers to tenderly stroke my cheek - allowed them to brush my hair away from my face - allowed them to lift my face upwards. Tentatively, my eyes opened. There, crouched over me, wasn't the man who had dragged me into the darkness. Although I couldn't make out her face, I knew it was her.

Slowly, she knelt down next to me. Gently, she covered my exposed breasts. Tenderly, she shifted my body so my jeans could be pulled up my legs and back into position. All the time she did this she didn't say a word. Then she slipped her arms around me and held me to her. The smell of her skin was so familiar, almost as if I had known it all my life. It was a comfort, a safe place I had yearned for ever since I had lost my parents. And in those strong arms, I cried. Soft strokes glided through my hair, down my back, then back to my hair again. Whatever happened in the future, there was one thing I knew. I didn't want her to leave me.

I can't tell you how long we sat there, because time meant nothing. But it was as if she knew when it was the right moment. And at this moment, she stood, lifting me up with her. My feet were nowhere near the floor, as she was carrying me. I didn't know how she did it, didn't know how she could carry me home with such ease. There was no evidence of exertion, her breathing showed no signs of being laboured. In fact, I don't think I actually heard her breathe.

Arriving at my front door, she placed me on the step and stepped back. I missed the feel of her immediately. In the street light I could see her expression. She seemed shy, although I don't know why she should. This woman had saved me from being raped - I don't know how, but she had. She had also been there to pick up the pieces. Once again, I don't know how she knew I was there, but it doesn't change the fact that she knew.

'Thank you.' What else could I say? Don't leave me? Blue eyes opened slightly, and then returned to their natural shape.

'You should get inside.' It had been the first thing she had said to me since the incident. Her voice was gentle, calming. I didn't move. She nodded towards my front door. 'You need to get warm, Charlotte.'

She needed to go, that much was obvious. And I wasn't helping matters by sitting on my front doorstep keeping her waiting. Rummaging through my pockets, I brought out my keys, holding the sharp objects in my hand. Why hadn't I thought of clutching these in my grip and stabbing him?

'It wouldn't have made much difference.' My eyes shot up to meet hers. How had she known what I had been thinking? 'You were staring at your keys ... I thought you might have regretted not using them.' A good excuse, but not one I believed. I could have been staring at my keys for a number of reasons. 'But you actually need to use them to get into your house.' I could hear the soft smile in her tone, and I also knew that the conversation about how she knew was over.

Unsteadily, I stood up. Helena stepped forward and placed a hand on my elbow as if to steady me. Electricity raced through my nerves and left me gasping. 'You'll be alright after a soak.' Her mouth was close to my ear, and I felt a tremble race down my spine. 'Here. Let me help you.' Taking the keys from my hand, she unlocked my front door and gave the keys back to me.

'Would you like to come inside? Have a coffee?'

Helena's eyes squinted, as if she was digesting the questions. A slow smile spread across her face before she replied. 'Thank you for the invitation. Maybe another time.' Considering what I had gone through, I actually felt a flash of embarrassment. She had made it apparent moments before that she had to go, and here I was asking her to give up more of her time.

Turning, I made to step inside.

'Charlotte?'

Looking back I was slightly shocked to see she had covered the space between us so quietly and quickly. Tentatively, she placed one foot over my doorway, her body language initially seeming uneasy. Now that she was standing next to me, I noticed how tall she was. She must've been six foot. Tilting my head, I looked up into her striking face. In the light of my hallway, she was even more beautiful than I had previously thought. Leaning forward, her eyes fluttered slightly, and I was sure she was inhaling me. Having her so close made my senses scream for some connection. Closing my eyes, I mimicked her actions. Her scent was intoxicating, just as much as her presence. Cool lips brushed over my forehead and seemed to etch their mark on my skin, almost as if I had been branded. My fingers itched, as they wanted to thread their way into her hair and pull that face down to mine. Unbelievable, considering I had just nearly been raped.

When I opened my eyes again, she had moved back out of my house and was standing at the gate. How the hell she had moved so quickly, I don't know.

'Goodnight, Charlotte.' Then she was gone. I didn't see her move, but she was gone, and I was left standing wide eyed and open mouthed at my front door.

It wasn't until I was in the shower did I realise something. Why hadn't she told me to call the police? That would have been the first thing you would say when you had found a person who had nearly been raped, wasn't it? Not to go home and have a bath. Bathing got rid of most the evidence, leaving the victim to talk their way through their ordeal convincingly enough for the police to actually do something to catch the perpetrator.

That was another thing. Where had he gone? He had been nowhere to be seen when I had finally opened my eyes. Come to think of it, I hadn't heard any running - or fighting, either.

Stepping out of the shower, I looked down at my body. There was bruising and some scratches, but nothing that I couldn't have inflicted on myself if I wanted to accuse a man I was pissed off with of rape. Quickly, I changed into my pyjamas and hurried into my bedroom. Pulling the curtains back, I examined the street. It was empty. Tonight there was no woman standing there

looking up at me, and I felt even more alone than usual.

Sitting on the edge of my bed I contemplated calling the police anyway. As my hand reached out to grab the receiver, I stopped, pulled back, my fingers wiggling in anticipation. What if the reason she didn't advise me to call the police was because she had hurt him? Did she think she would get into trouble for saving a woman from a horrific situation? What if she had done more than hurt him? Nah. I would've seen it, wouldn't I? Seen evidence of his body somewhere in the alleyway. But it was dark - and I was in shock...

'For fuck's sake, Charly. How on earth could she have hurt him? She's big, but so was he.'

Sighing, I pushed myself back onto the bed, contorting my body around to turn off the lamp. The best thing I could do was sleep on it. Not a good way to start a conversation with the police, granted. 'Oh, hello. Last night I was nearly raped. So I came home and had a shower, and then went to bed.' Click ... buzz. Or, 'Excuse me for interrupting more important crimes, but after nearly being raped last night, I had a shower, and slept. I think the man who tried to do this was murdered by an invisible woman.' Click. Buzz. Ner Ner - Ner Ner - screech ... slam of doors, my front door kicked down before I was physically restrained.

But even the thought of that didn't make me turn the light back on and ring the station. Maybe it was because I felt stupid about showering; maybe it was because I felt ashamed of what had happened; or maybe it was because a niggling thought deep within me wanted to protect Helena Michaels.

My gut was going with the latter.

As you can imagine, dreams were rife. Images of my attacker's face haunted me, making me scream into the blackness of the room. I could feel the panic I had gone through, the abject desolation of knowing that I was alone in a situation that is every woman's worst nightmare. But the dreams didn't just concentrate on one man - how could they? There was someone else making an appearance, too. It was as if my brain had soaked the situation without me seeing it - almost as though it had been attached to a camera that was situated just above my head. He was over me, pushing into me, and nearly achieving his goal, when a shadow moved across the passageway with such speed, it was like it was on fast forward. She was behind him, blue eyes flashing with uncontrolled rage and power. Those same eyes seemed to lock onto mine for a moment before she half closed them. One hand grabbed his throat and twisted his head to the side, making him hold his breath. I watched in fascination as her mouth opened widely exposing what appeared to be her teeth, but not, if you know what I mean. In one fluid movement, she bit down on his neck with such force I was surprised I didn't feel it. Harrumph. That's all he could say. His face was a mask of terror and pain, and then went blank as she seemed to tear her teeth away leaving a gaping mess where his neck used to be. He was like a rag doll, a tired old rag doll that had served its purpose and then thrown away into the trash. That's where he ended up - in a heap near someone's wheelie bins.

With a small cry, I bolted upright, sweat coating my skin and my heart raging wildly. What the fuck? For a moment it felt as if I couldn't breathe; my mouth was dry and rough, and each swallow I made hurt. The dream had seemed so real, and even in the darkness of my room, I believed I could sense something that usually wasn't there. Rationally, I knew it was my over active brain that thought it, as it was still trying to flash images of my dream before my eyes.

Shakily, I leaned over and clicked on the lamp beside my bed. Brightness illuminated each corner of the room, and this should have made me feel better. But it didn't. Maybe it was because it allowed me to see that my bedroom door was open. I knew I had closed it. I always did. I hated to have the door open just as much as I disliked having light in the room when I slept. But, how else could I explain it? Could it be because I had been so intent on seeing if Helena had been waiting in the street that I had forgotten to close it properly? Or was it my distracted thoughts about calling the police? Lifting my hand I threaded my fingers through my hair in a motion that tried to calm me. What was going on? Everything, to me of late, seemed alien. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore, and it wasn't because of what had nearly happened on my way home. It had been before that - more like ever since I had spotted the dark figure in the club.

Then my dream came back to me. Images of a would be rapist being murdered by a woman I was attracted to flooded through my head making a shiver race down my spine and then back towards my neck. The sensation of the tingle on my throat made my hand tentatively touch the spot I had witnessed Helena biting in my dream. A fast thudding drummed through my fingers as I felt my overzealous heart beat thrum insistently under the tips. Nervously, a laugh broke out of my mouth. What the hell was I thinking? It was a dream that was all. A dream brought on by stress and fear. A dream conjured from my subconscious, the same subconscious that was trying valiantly to rationalise how Helena Michaels could appear and disappear with such ease; how she could lift me so effortlessly; how she had single handedly stopped an attacker and made him disappear with no trace.

But to rip out his throat and throw him like he was made of air? To actually know I needed her? To read my mind on more than one occasion?

'Stop. Don't go down this path.' I wanted to be rational, I did. But how could I when everything that had happened pointed to the illogical? Maybe I was cracking up, going down the bendy path to the nut house, taking the mad woman route out of town, and every other phrase that suggested I was progressively losing my mind.

Throwing the covers back, I pulled my shorts down my legs to examine the bruising and scratches once again. I could have done this myself, couldn't I? Just like the police would think. Maybe I was having a fit of some kind - maybe there hadn't been anyone waiting in the shadows ready to drag me into darkness and fuck me. And, just maybe, Helena Michaels hadn't actually saved me at all, because, in fact, there had been nothing to save me from - and no real woman to save me in the first place. It even popped into my head that I had created the scenario just so I could see her again.

Scrambling over the duvet, I raced into the bathroom and rummaged in the laundry basket. Pulling out the jeans I had been wearing, I checked for evidence. Dirt. Wet patches on the back

where I had been seated on the ground. Nothing of note. Turning, I raced downstairs and began routing through the bin. Pulling out the top I had been wearing, I noticed there was something other than dirt on it. Something dark. Something reddish. Something that so easily could be blood. I knew I had scratches, but none of them were anywhere near the top of me - nowhere near where my collar was - where his face and neck had been. There were not many spots there, but they were there all the same.

Pushing the shirt back into the bin, I let the lid fall back. Could it have been when I had head butted him in the face? I had heard his nose crack, but I hadn't seen if it had bled or not. That must be it. It must be. What other reason could there have been? Just as the thought entered my head, another followed almost immediately. Shaking my head, I tried to dispel it - tried to rid my head of the craziness that was vying for centre stage. People like that didn't exist. They were all part of a folktale conjured by gothic writers to symbolise the fin de siècle - the end of an era - a period of degeneration- the same mental degeneration I knew I was experiencing. Vampires did not exist. People did not go around tearing out the throats of humans and feed on their blood. And if I began to believe they did, then I was more far gone than I had suspected.

Sighing, I turned as if to go back to bed. However, just as I reached the doorway, a noise sounded from outside. Moving towards the kitchen window, I looked into the blackness. There is nothing more blinding than trying to see out into darkness when you are standing in a brightly lit room. You can't see anything, although you remember a few seconds after you begin to look that if there is someone out there, they can see you clearly.

Stepping backwards, I eventually reached the light switch on the wall. Click. Now whoever was outside were in the same position as me. Stealthily, I moved towards the window again. My eyes tried to accommodate the change in environment; I could nearly feel my pupils expanding to help with the task. A movement to my left made my head swivel quickly, but there was nothing there. Then again. Quicker. Moving away and to the rear of my garden. Was it a shadow brought on by movement near the streetlights? Or was it a person? A figure swiftly moving up and over my back wall?

Then nothing. No movement. No figure. No imaginary shadows. Not even a cat. And I was left to stand in the kitchen at half past four in the morning wondering when I would actually begin to feel normal again, although I knew deep down that I hadn't felt normal in quite a few years.

By the time morning came I was knackered. After everything that had happened the previous night, I found sleep evasive, although I bet you can understand why. I wanted to go back to sleep - wanted to experience dreams with just a dark haired woman taking centre stage, but I knew that would be impossible. I was too hyped up - too freaked out by what I'd dreamed about previously to trust myself to just slip into a sweet slumber.

As soon as the sun came up, I went back to bed. I didn't have to work that evening, and for that I was thankful. Usually I dreaded my days off, as I had to entertain my miserable little self without the added distraction of working. I had expected Sam to ask me to work, considering Tina still

hadn't made any contact, but he had glibly announced the night before that her spot had been filled. The bastard hadn't even called to see why she hadn't turned up - just hired a new body.

After sleeping the day away, I woke up and decided to call the garage so they could pick up my heap of shit that was still parked outside the club. After meeting the bloke there, and him turning the key once before the car burst into life, I drove home. It was time to eat and vegetate in front of the TV. I was half way through some pasta, when I was distracted by the sound of the newsreader's voice. It wasn't the tone and quality of sound that alerted me; it was the content.

'Last seen Tuesday night leaving a well known hot spot. Lucas Jefferies, twenty nine, had been escorted from the premises of a local bar for drunken behaviour.' Sharply, I lifted my head to be greeted by the eyes of the man from the alleyway the night before. Although the picture had been taken when he was on holiday, his eyes still held the evil I had come up close and personal to - just as the image's eyes on the screen held me captive once again. 'His body was discovered in the woods earlier today.' His body? 'Police suspect he had fallen from a height, and indications suggest that animals had discovered the body first.' What? Animals? What fucking animals? Wolves? We didn't have wolves in fucking Norwich. 'Police are asking for any information.'

I bet. And I suppose I could give it to them. One - he tried to rape me. Two - I dreamt a woman tore his throat out. Yeah. That would go down well. It would be a case of:

In answer to your first point. He tried to rape you, but you didn't tell anyone?

Secondly. You dreamt *what*?

Thirdly. All you will feel is a little pin prick.

Click. Silence. Well, apart from my brain whirring like a clockwork mouse. This was fucked up. Big time. And so was I, by all accounts.

All evening I was on edge. Not surprising really considering the man who had accosted me in the alleyway was now lying on a slab in the local mortuary with parts of his body chewed away. But that wasn't the only reason why I kept on standing up and pacing around my living room. It was more than that. No. Not Helena Michaels, either, although she did pop in my head on more than one occasion.

It was Tina. Her face kept on slipping into my mind, and I couldn't understand why. The last time I had seen her was two nights after she had been fondling the teeth challenged man at the bar. Everybody knew she had taken him back to her place, but she had also come back into work the following evening. That struck him off the suspect list, as we hadn't seen him either. Nothing weird there, though, as one night stands usually stay that way, unless they want someone to keep their bed warm for an evening.

By half past ten I'd had enough. I couldn't settle - I couldn't think straight. I had to see if Tina

was ok. Flicking through the phone book, I searched for her name. Tina Matthews. I knew she lived near Old Catton, but not exactly where. Thankfully, her name and address were listed, so I lifted the phone and dialled. No answer. So I tried again. Still the phone burred with no sign of life at the other end. It was that thought that made me stand, snatch my coat and keys, and head out of the door. If I didn't do something to stop my brain conjuring images of Tina slumped on her bed, then I would go crazy.

Parking outside her house, I noticed the downstairs light was on. At least she was home, even if she couldn't be arsed to answer the phone. As soon as the thought popped into my head, I felt bad. How many times had I ignored the phone when people had called to see if I was ok? How many friends had slowly pulled away because I had erected a brick wall after my parents had died? Did I want Tina to feel she had no one? Did I want her to feel like I had? Like I did?

Pressing the bell a couple of times, I stepped back and waited for her to answer the door. Nothing. So I pressed again, this time holding my finger down so the sound eventually would drive her mad and she would answer the door just to tell me to fuck off. Then it struck me. Would I answer the door at nearly midnight? I think not. Even though my track record would say otherwise. Stooping at the letterbox, I lifted the flap and called her name. Once again, nothing. Moving further down, I replaced my mouth with my eyes. The hallway was dimly lit, as light from the room to the left was on. Craning my head further, I tried to peep around the doorway, but all I could see was the side of the sofa. I was just about to move away when something caught my eye. A shoe was lying on the floor - and just hovering over it, as if the leg was perched on the sofa, was a foot. It was a female foot - that much was obvious. But unlike a normal female foot, it seemed too pale, too blue.

My heart started to thump harder. Something wasn't right with this set up. Tina had not called in work, not contacted anyone, not answered the phone or the door, but she was there. Unmoving. Bluish. It didn't take a rocket scientist to work the rest out. Turning, I frantically looked around as if the answer to everything could be found in the street. But it was empty. Should I shout? Should I bang inanely on the door and hope that a miracle would happen? I didn't even have my phone with me - that was stuffed inside my bag that was sitting comfortably on my lounge floor.

'Shit!' You can say that again. 'Shit!' Thoughts of charging full pelt at the door and acting like one of Cagney and Lacey came to mind, but I knew that the door in front of me wouldn't move with my fly weight battering against it. But, it was worth a shot. Moving backwards, I focused on my goal. Gathering all my strength, I raced towards the wooden barrier, my shoulder turned to the side. THUD! Fuck. The pain rushing through me told me that the energy I had tried to use to force entry was now rattling back inside me. I was not deterred - sore, but not deterred. Once again, I moved away. Once again I charged. Once again a booming noise echoed through the neighbourhood followed by an expletive from me.

'For Christ's sake! *SHUT THE FUCK UP!*' At least I had someone's attention. It was a pity the voice was coming from a house further down. There was only one thing for it, and that was to do it again. THUMP! Shit. This was shortly followed by more voices, more anger, more light. Tina's next door neighbour opened his front door, and I knew I had to be quick before he just yelled abuse and bugged off.

'I think she's sick. We need to call the police.'

'Sick. I'll give you sick. And the police. Don't you know what ...'

'Please. Call the police. Call someone. She ... I think she might be dead.' This was an admission I had been trying to avoid ever since Tina had not come into work, but there was no avoiding it now. The evidence was too damning. I felt ill. Drained. In pain. The last thing I needed was for this man to close his door and leave me outside with the knowledge I had gained. I watched as he processed the information - watched how he deliberated going inside and becoming involved. With a sigh, he turned and went back in. Initially I thought he had decided against helping, but he didn't close the door. Next, he reappeared, holding a phone out to me.

'You call. I don't need this shit.' Amazing how some people can be when they are needed. I honestly believe the only reason he gave me his phone was so he could go back to bed. Cynical, but accurate. It also came true, because as soon as I had called the police, he snatched the phone back and slammed back inside, leaving me standing out in the street on my own.

Ten minutes later, blue lights flashed intermittently in the dark road. Two coppers had come to the scene, and to be honest, I believed helping me was the last thing they wanted to be doing. Even after one of them had peeped through the letterbox and determined the person on the couch was not moving. I watched as one man rammed himself against the door, the door splintering away like paper. Trepidation seeped out. And a smell. A sickly sweet smell. A smell I had always associated with dead cats.

Both coppers held their hands over their noses and mouths before venturing inside. Funnily enough, so did I. Venture inside, I mean. I was too thick to cover my senses. 'Jesus Christ. Call an ambulance.' I shouldn't have looked. I should have followed the lead copper and raced from the place to throw up near the step. But I didn't. I stood, frozen. Lying on the couch was Tina. Her eyes were staring blankly at the ceiling, her mouth open. Although the sight of her face should have been enough to feed my nightmares for the rest of my life, that wasn't what made me slump to the ground and try to vomit. It was the blood. Loads of it. It was all around her neck, over the cushions and the sofa, soaked into her t-shirt - it was everywhere.

I couldn't look at her face, couldn't look at the blood. All I could seem to focus on was a half opened hand and a knife on the floor. From outside I could hear the emergency call going through to the depot - words like dead, suicide, knife, throat cut. Suicide? Tina was many things, but I had never thought her to be suicidal. That was my role on this earth, although I did mine badly. Unfortunately, she didn't.

An hour passed, although it seemed like longer. I had been questioned, treated by paramedics, and then released. I refused a lift home, as I knew I would only have to return to the scene the following day to get my car. The way I was feeling, I never wanted to step foot in Tina's road again for as long as I lived.

Arriving home, I felt beat. This was too much. Too fucking much. I wasn't close to the waitress,

by any stretch of the imagination, but it didn't stop the fact I had seen her dead eyes staring into nothing - didn't stop the redness that pooled and clotted around her neck like a liquid noose. Didn't stop the knowledge that maybe I could have helped her in some way. I knew she was lonely, knew she had nothing and no one in her life, and I did nothing to alleviate it. I could have stretched out a friendly hand instead of being aloof - could've taken her up on her many offers of staying behind for a drink after work. But no. I had preferred to go home to emptiness and fight my demons off by myself.

Yes. I felt guilty. I also felt a sense of foreboding. Just in the matter of days my miserable quiet little life had become something you would find on the blurb of a trashy novel. I wished I could flick to the back page and see how it all panned out. Alas, that was something I had to live through. Again.

Over a week passed and nothing else happened. It was as if I was waiting for another chapter to unfold, but I had to get through the padding of the book first. Sam had taken the news just as I had expected him to. Blankly. Obviously, this pissed me off. What kind of man could not react to a person he had known for two years killing herself? Apparently, a man like Sam Jones. Nothing was mentioned after. There had only been a small section in the local tabloid indicating a woman in her late thirties had been found dead in her home. It was when I was reading the article that something else triggered inside my wayward little brain.

Flicking to page three, I reread the story about Lucas Jefferies then turned back to the one about Tina. Very different incidents apart from a few similarities. One - they were both dead. Two - they both had damage to their throats. Three - I knew both of them. An image of my dream launched in full Technicolor through my mind - visions of a full red mouth opening widely and ripping a man's neck away. Shaking my head, I tried to dispel them, but they wouldn't budge. It was as if they were programmed to run until I acknowledged their significance. What fucking significance? Two very different people died for very different reasons. One killed herself, whilst the other ...

Whilst the other...

Whilst the other what? Got chewed out by a legendary creature of the night? Was stopped in his tracks by Nosferatu herself? Met his fate like so many others who were supposedly sucked dry by the undead? I needed to get a grip - take a hold on this burgeoning belief in the impossible. Vampirism did not exist. Garlic haters, cross dodgers, big toothed killers were not something a person who is soundly in the twenty first century believes. And although my grasp on the twenty first century was slipping, I still couldn't go down the road of the fictional offerings of John Polidori and Bram Stoker.

But even though I was in denial, it didn't escape my knowledge that as soon as I had started to consider the vampire scenario, the images had stopped. Maybe because I was concentrating on something else. That was it. It had to be. Didn't it?

Two hours later I was in the club. Tina's circuit was now my responsibility, and that included table thirty one. All night I looked across to the empty seats and wished that Helena would come in again. But it stayed vacant. However, just as I was telling Tina's replacement about her supposed suicide, I felt the tell tale spark of someone watching me, shortly followed by the escalation of my blood through my veins. Even before turning I knew she would be there - knew that within moments I would be staring into blue eyes once again.

Just as I had foreseen, she was there. And just as I knew I would be, I was next to her in moments, the smile slipping effortlessly across my face. Seeing her sitting there, her eyes sparkling, I felt comforted. All the thoughts about suicide, murder and vampires faded and I was once again lost in her. What was it about those eyes that made me feel as if I could achieve anything? Do anything? Feel so alive? Why did I crave her presence? Long for her touch? Yearn to inhale her again? I don't know, but that doesn't change the fact that I did.

'How are you, Charlotte?' Yet again her voice hit me right in the place where I wanted it to, making my blood seem to race even faster. 'Sorry I've not been here.' Why should she be sorry? 'But I needed to' she cleared her throat, 'get away for a while.' I never even questioned the reason why she should have needed to get away. I was just too enchanted by her.

The air was charged with expectation, and then I realised she was waiting for me to speak. Blushing, I stuttered out 'I'm good. You?' Stupid, I know. This woman had saved my life and I couldn't even string a sentence together without making a fool out of myself. Straightening, I tried to compose myself. 'Red wine, Helena?' Momentarily, I paused. It had been the first time I had spoken her name - the first indication I had received her card. A smile broke across her perfect mouth before she nodded once and leaned back into the booth. 'Are you going to drink it tonight?' Why had I said that? I'm an idiot, that's why. Even in the darkness I saw the smile waver slightly. Pushing herself forward, it appeared she absorbed me in one look.

'I don't drink ... *wine*.' Puzzled, I began to fidget. 'I just like to order it so I can smell it.' Conspiratorially, she leaned over. I, too, leaned closer, as I believed she was waiting to take me into her confidence. 'And by coming here and ordering it ...' she came even closer. 'I get to look at the most beautiful woman I have ever seen for as long as I want.' Her mouth was slightly open, as she had pronounced the t in the last word with such crispness, it stayed there as if cut. I was mesmerised by it. I wanted to place my own mouth against hers and move mine sensuously across those ruby lips. Drink from her - taste the claret - embrace the fullness of the waiting portal - claim them and never let them go.

Time passed. Neither of us moved away, or moved closer. I could smell her smell. I could almost taste it. God, I wanted her. Wanted her so fucking much I ached. Wanted to grab her hand and take her away from the dinginess of the bar I worked and lead her home ... lead her through my hallway and upstairs into my bedroom. Wanted to slip my hands over her porcelain skin, revel in the coolness, and fully delight in the contours of this delectable being seated no more than inches away from me.

'Charly!' I hated my boss. Hated his inept timing, his ignorance of people. 'Table twenty two need drinks.'

Snap. The spell was broken. Pulling away, I blinked my eyes as if to dispel my inner longings. As I turned, I heard her voice. 'Can I walk you home?' A grin spread like butter across my face. 'Just to make sure you get home safe, I mean.'

I was going to just say yes, but I had to add, 'But will I be safe from you?' Looking back, I watched her face change through a myriad of emotions before settling on a calmed stance. 'Because, I ...' I leaned forward again. 'don't mind if you are a little on the unsafe side. I trust you.' The thought of taking her home and slipping her out of her clothes fleetingly slipped inside my head. Blue eyes widened slightly before she smiled once again.

'It is more of the case of will *I* be safe with *you*.'

A badly mimicked growl left my lips, and it felt good. Not the crap impression. The feeling of lightness ... the wanting to play ... to flirt ... to be part of the human race again. A laugh shot out of her mouth, a sensuous laugh, a laugh that infected me even more with happiness. 'I'll have to ply you with drinks so you can get drunk on the fumes.' With that, I turned and went to table twenty two to get their orders. Considering the evening had started off so badly, deep down within me I had a hope that it would be ending a lot better.

Watching her wait for me for the rest of the evening brought many emotions out to play. I hadn't had sex in nearly five years, and the only release I had allowed myself was through my dreams. Even when I had wanted to take matters into my own hands, I had been deterred. Imagining making love to Helena Michaels was a lot easier than actually being in the situation of naked and ready to act. Was it really like riding a bike? Hopefully not, as I was crap on two wheels. My head was having a debate with itself, and now and again it would ask for opinions from other parts of my body. My libido was ready and waiting, whilst constantly questioning why it had been shut out for so long. My heart was too busy hammering to its own tune to actually pay any attention to what was going on. My gut was agreeing with my sex drive, and the rational side of my brain was telling the confused side to lighten up. But it just wasn't taking a woman home and fucking her. I had never been the type of woman to do that even before my parents had been taken away so suddenly. Sexual and physical attraction had always come hand in hand with a more deep rooted connection. But there was no denying it - I did feel a more deep rooted connection to the woman who followed my every move around the bar.

Doubt niggled. Yes, I was attracted. Yes, I wanted to be more than her waitress. Yes, I wanted to gently take her, take her hard, take her and hold her and love her, make her cry out my name, make her want me again and again. But how could I? How could someone as insignificant as me pleasure someone as gorgeous and breathtaking as Helena Michaels? What could I give her that she couldn't get from hundreds of women who would fall at her feet? You guessed it. I was scared of not being good enough to satisfy her - scared of losing her before I had a proper chance of finding her.

Looking over to where she was sitting, I could make out her features. A half smile was on her face and her expression was dreamlike. She seemed so relaxed, yet poised. And so bloody beautiful.

Sighing, I broke my gaze away. If I turned her down, she would probably disappear from my life: if I failed in the bedroom department, and she disappeared from my life, at least I would have taken the chance at loving her. Wasn't that enough reason to bite the bullet and take the initiative? Then it struck me. Where on earth had I got the idea that I would be making love to Helena Michaels tonight in the first place?

Once again, I looked over at table thirty one. There was no doubt about it. Helena Michaels looked hungry, and I was beginning to feel like the main course. Not that I minded. Not one little bit.

She was waiting for me outside when I left off work. As usual, I was the first person to leave, but that didn't mean that I didn't stand in the passageway between the bar and the street for a while trying to pluck up the courage to see if she was actually there. But there she was, leaning against the wall, her lithe body looking even more appealing than I had believed possible.

Pushing herself away from the brick, she was beside me instantly, her tall frame shadowing my own. Nervously, I smiled and tried to utter a greeting, and, weirdly enough, she seemed to be just as on edge. That seemed to relax me a little. With a backwards glance I looked over to where I had parked my car. There was no way I was going to tell her that I actually didn't need walking home, as that might make her bid me adieu and leave me standing there wishing I had kept my big fat mouth shut. But, my big fat mouth stayed mute. Thankfully.

Silently, we started walking. It didn't seem unnatural that conversation wasn't needed. It felt right, somehow, although a part of me wanted to either whistle or sing with excitement. Once again, I was thankful I kept the urge under wraps.

Near the point where I would normally cross the road, Helena slowed, slipped her hand over the crook of my arm and led me across. How did she know this was the place I would cross? It wasn't obvious. Well, unless she had seen me do it before. Who was I kidding? I knew that she had seen me do it, even though at the time I had just been freaked out. It had happened the very first night I had seen her at the bar.

'Tell me about yourself.'

Her voice seemed to echo in the empty streets, and although they were only lit by the streetlights, I felt like I was illuminated. It was the first time in so long that I felt embarrassed about my life. Most of the time I just got on with it with no thoughts of how it would sound to a woman I was attracted to. What could, or should, I tell her? I was waiting to die? I was waiting for this life to be over so I could just blend away into nothingness? Should I regurgitate all the pain and suffering I had put myself through after I believed my life had been cut short with the loss of my parents?

'What did you want to know?'

A pause. Then a dark haired head turned in my direction, almost pinning me to the spot. She stopped. So did I. Blue eyes captured mine, and I saw her face soften. 'Everything.'

Moving away from her, I felt the tug of her hand on my arm as it tried to prevent me from leaving her side - prevent me from blocking out the onset of knowledge that would probably make her wish she hadn't asked to walk me home. However, she didn't keep me still: she moved with me once again. Once more we walked without talking.

We were nearly at my home by now. She hadn't repeated her question, although it was were still hovering around inside my head. Something was building up within my gut, and I knew it was a confession - knew they were words waiting to spew out into the cold air and give me some semblance of peace.

'Charlotte Warde.' Two words. Two simple familiar words fell from my lips, and they felt warm. Helena turned to face me, surprise evident. 'I'm thirty three and work in a bar.' It was like I was at an AA meeting. I wanted to finish with, 'And I'm a serial miserable fucker who can't seem to get a grip on reality,' but that would have been taking the illusion too far.

Helena nodded in acceptance, before scrunching up her face and popping her bottom lip inside her mouth as if she were contemplating something. A laugh shot out and then stopped. Furtively, she turned in my direction, blue eyes flashing with mischievousness. A grin shortly followed. Lifting her head high, she seemed to inhale the night air before turning to look at me again. 'Helena Michaels.' She dipped her head, making the long dark hair swish dramatically. 'And I'm a damned sight older than you.' It wasn't what she said; it was the way it came out. How much older? Looking at her, she couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me at the most. But her words seemed to give the impression she was old enough to be my grandmother, and now she was regretting walking a child home.

'Like how old? Thirty five - thirty six?' She laughed again and shook her head. 'Thirty seven?' More laughter. 'Eight?'

Stopping, she seemed to pull me to her, her face unexpectedly serious. Leaning forward, she placed her lips against my ear. I could feel the nearness of them. 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.' Tenderly, those same lips brushed against my lobe, making a shiver race down my spine and nestle at the base. 'And we are here.'

Here? Where was here? Lifting my head, I gazed into her face. Instead of breathing out like I had expected to, I felt the air jam in my throat. In this position it appeared as if I was worshipping a Goddess, as my eyes were focused on her face, and my body seemed ready to kneel before her. Slowly, she slipped her arms around me and pulled me closer. I think she knew I was on the verge of slumping to the ground. Instead, I, too, slipped my hands inside the jacket she was wearing and circled her waist. It was as if something inside my brain clicked into place. Being in her arms seemed the most natural place to be, and I couldn't understand why I had been nervous earlier. Part of me wanted to rest my head on her chest and absorb the comfort I knew I would find there. However, a bigger part of me wanted to lift myself onto my tip toes and capture her

lips with my own. Even before she moved her face closer, I knew which side of me would win.

Her lips were soft. So bloody soft and inviting. Initially they seemed to hold their position before moving delectably over my own waiting mouth. Sparks of energy left her and entered me. It wasn't just her mouth, it was her embrace, her smell, her presence that made me feel as if I was drowning. But it wasn't a bad drowning, it was more like a submerging myself into something that would fully coat me, fully protect me, fully be with me for as long as I needed her. And at this precise moment I knew I would need her for the rest of my life.

Deeper. Deeper and deeper I fell into her. The kiss was becoming more insistent, more carnal, more unstoppable, even though I didn't want it to stop. Flames danced through me, heat burned every place her body came in contact with mine, and I was falling through her, falling into her, falling for her more than I had already. Long slender fingers began to wrap themselves around my hair, threading their way through my long locks. As they tightened, I knew her desire was building. The thought of her wanting me as much as I wanted her was enough to make me begin to step backwards, begin to inch towards the front door of my home. I was aroused. I was incensed with want for her. There were no thoughts of not being able to please her, no concerns about not being up to her standard. By the feel of her body pushing into mine, I knew she wanted me.

Slam. My back hit the door, but I didn't try to get my keys out. Helena was over me, her body pushing my legs apart, her frame slipping effortlessly between my open legs. Feeling her pressing against me, I groaned inside her mouth. She pushed again, and again, and I could feel wetness seeping out of my core. Did she have that? Was she as wet for me as I was for her? God ... I wanted to find out ... wanted to feel it, taste it, bathe in it.

Her mouth was on my throat. Hot patches flared with each suck and lick, each rampant caress of her lips. Pushing myself up and into her, I felt the edge of her teeth graze the skin, and the excitement rushing through me nearly made me climax.

Swallowing rapidly, I tried to move away, but she was insistent. The way I was feeling at that precise moment, I knew I would let her take me right there on my front doorstep - right there in the eyes of the sleeping world. Hips pushed into mine, and I could feel the sensation climbing up and through my throat. I wanted to cry out with joy, wanted to scream her name into the air, wanted her to rip my jeans off and enter me again and again and again. But I also wanted this to be right. I wanted to undress her as if she was a precious gift, wanted to absorb her naked beauty, wanted to feel her skin glide over my fingers, glide over my own naked body. Therefore, I needed to stop. Needed to make her see we had to go inside and do things right.

'Helena?' Was that my voice? It seemed as if it was above me. 'Helena?' Yes. It sounded like my voice, but lighter, happier. 'Let's go inside, honey.' She was still kissing my neck, nestling into the place where the shoulder meets the curve of the throat. Sensations rippled through me, and my eyelids began to flutter once again. It seemed as if I was fading back into the glorious place I had been previously, and my body welcomed it. But was this really the way I wanted our first time to be? 'Look at me, Helena.' Lips seemed to tear themselves away from my skin, and I watched in amazement at the transformation of the woman I had seen so many times. Here

wasn't the cool collected female who had teased me, who had always seemed calm and in control, whose blue eyes seemed to change with each emotion she felt. This woman was primitive, animal, powerful. Even her eyes seemed to show a fierceness, a hunger, a need for fulfilment. Instead of feeling scared, I just knew I needed her more. 'Let's go inside.'

A nod followed. A step back. An impatient patience surrounded her.

We were just inside when she was on me again, the sound of the slam behind me indicating she had closed the door with force. 'I want you. Want you. Want you.' Her mouth was frantically covering my face, the utterances spilling out onto my skin. Without thought, she lifted me, her arms not buckling under my weight. The next thing I remember I was being placed delicately on the bed. Helena stepped back from me, her face seemingly afraid. Leaning up, I propped myself on my elbows. What was the matter? Why had she stopped? Moved away? She can't have changed her mind? I watched as her head drooped so she could look at her hands, the palms then the back. I knew she was contemplating backing out. I also knew it wasn't because she didn't want me as much as I wanted her.

I couldn't let her leave. Couldn't let the feeling I had experienced walk out my door and leave me. The connection I felt with her wasn't just physical - it was completion. I had to do something to show her that she had to stay - had to stay with me. Yes. It sounds desperate - maybe because I was.

Standing, I watched her expression. The same lust was in her eyes, but her body was telling her to stop. Slowly, deliberately, I began to unbutton my shirt. Pop. Pop. Pop. Each button sounded deafening. Each button leisurely freed itself. And as each button separated from cloth, I noticed how her eyes were rooted to the movement of my fingers. Swiftly, my blouse landed on the floor. Next, I placed my hands on the button of my jeans, waited, and then slowly guided the button out, shortly to be followed by the zip. All the time I did this, she watched intently, her hands losing their fascination. Unhurriedly, I pushed my jeans free from my body, stepping out of them and towards her. All that was remaining was my underwear.

I was in front of her now. Inches away. Nearly naked. Reaching out, I slipped my hand over her jacket and eased it from her shoulder - then the next side - then off completely. She didn't move, just allowed me to do it. One by one I opened the buttons to her shirt, the silkiness of the material incensing my need to feel her skin. Then that too was gone. Unlike me, Helena wasn't wearing a bra, and I gasped when I saw the smoothness of her body. Trailing a finger over the flesh, I revelled in the coolness that greeted me. Helena groaned. Nipples were hard, dark and full. I wanted to lean over and capture one inside my mouth to feel the solidness of her desire. But I didn't. Just rolled my fingertip over the peak and glorified in the noise she made. Tracing the line down her abdomen, I could feel the muscles rippling, a sensation that only made me feel even wetter. Then the coolness of the button of her jeans met and connected with the heat from my hand. As soon as I reached that spot, her hand clasped over my own. Quickly, I looked into her face, almost expecting to see her shaking her head and telling me to stop. If she had, I would have. I only wanted her if she wanted me, whatever you may think of my desperation. But she didn't want me to pull away; she wanted to help - wanted to get her jeans off herself more quickly. I noted her resignation - not in a way that said she was doing this because she had to,

more like she had to do this or it would eat her alive.

She was naked. So was I. And all that was between us was air, but not for long. Both of us seemed to move at the exact same instant to forge together in a maelstrom of need. It was connection. It was completion. It was everything I could or would ever need. The feel of her in my arms, the sensation of her body pressed close to mine, was perfection. Her hands were moving over my skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. Every molecule, every hair on my body, could feel her. Every nerve screamed out for her to quell this ache, this longing raging within. With ease, she guided me backwards and to the bed. With delicacy, she leaned me back, placing me in position of worship. And with longing, I raised my hand and captured hers, pulling her gently onto the bed and onto me.

God. The feel of her body over mine, on top of mine - it was consuming. The silken smoothness of her skin glided against mine as if she was hovering over me, but I could still feel her. Slipping my hands over her hips and up her back, I allowed the sigh I needed to release hit air. She was moving against me - slowly - teasingly. I wanted to pull her down, wanted her body to weld into mine, to slot into the curves that I knew were there just for that purpose. Lips caressed my neck, lips that were cool yet hot. Kisses embedded themselves into my skin, and I pushed upwards to heighten the contact. A hand cupped my jaw, and I felt her tilt my face to hers. Blue eyes sparkled with lust, her body moved rhythmically against mine, just as perfectly as mine was moving against hers. A firm thigh pushed my legs apart, and I felt her slip in between my legs. A press against the point of my yearning allowed another breath to free itself. So, she did it again, and again, and again. Firmer thrusts, her eyes locked onto mine. I traced my hands down her back and grasped her ass, pulling her closer still. The sensation that raced through me made me gasp. This, accompanied by the distinct fluttering of her eyes, made the juices seep from within and coat the entrance to my desire.

I needed her. I needed this. I craved for her to increase the tempo, increase the pressure, increase the longing raging through me - the same longing that I believed was going to drive me mad. But she was steady. She was constant. She was driving me crazy with the agony of want. Helena was still watching me, her eyes hooded and dreamlike. I had to do something to make her know how much I needed her to take me - claim me - make me scream out her name - make me forget all the heartache of my life before this moment.

'Take ... me. Please. Take ... me.' The words were staggered, hard to utter, but I couldn't keep them back. I had to tell her - had to make her understand how much I ached for her.

Tilting her head, a smile slipped over her mouth, but she continued to push at her own pace. I couldn't take it. Was she teasing me? Did she want me to beg her to slip her slender fingers deep inside and alleviate the throbbing surging through me? Opening my mouth, I was about to do as I believed she wished, but I changed my mind. If she wanted to play, I could play.

Leaning forward, I captured her mouth with my own, the kiss long and hard. Grasping her buttocks, I twisted my body underneath her. Slipping sideways, I was nearly in charge. A laugh shot out of her mouth, and that was the only invitation I needed. Flip. She was on her back, and I was the one in control. Straddling her waist, I pushed my wetness against her firm abdomen and

slipped up her skin. Then harder. And harder. And it felt so fucking good. But my pleasure was not the reason why I had taken over. I wanted her to know she belonged to me, that I was the one holding the cards - the one who would set the pace. Bending forwards, I kissed her, caught her, captured that divine mouth with my own and absorbed her whilst relinquishing all to her.

I was draped over her body, covering her like a mist. This time it was me who separated legs with my thighs; me who pushed against her clit - pushed against her wetness. And wet she was. Wet for me, wet because of me. I wanted to taste it, drink it, smear my face with her essence. One hand slipped between our bodies and stroked her skin. It was so sleek, like marble. Then I found her downy hair, soft and inviting. Gently, I moved my fingers down ... down to the heat I expected to be pooling there. Unlike the rest of her body, this place was warm, hot even. A firm bundle of nerves quivered as it waited for me to make my move. And I did. Slipping my fingers further down, I captured the mass of flesh, taut with desire, between my fingers, clamping it there to throb and pulse. A groan left her, and she lifted up to claim my mouth again. Willingly, I allowed her to take my lips, delaying the moment when I took her.

Inching down, one finger paused outside her entrance. It was as if the air stopped at that precise moment, and all I could hear was my ragged breathing. Effortlessly, I eased inside her, her juices collecting around it in greeting. Deep inside. Then out. Then in. Her eyes were blinking with the movement, her mouth opening and closing as if she wanted to speak but the words were jammed. Another finger, another push, followed by another and another. My speed was increasing, as I was finding it difficult to take this slowly. I needed to hear her cum; needed to hear her say my name; needed her to tip over the brink I had set up for her.

In and out, in and out. The rhythm was making me want her even more. Thrust, push, take, plunge. She was moaning with each stroke of my fingers, moaning my name quietly, my ears straining to hear her. Her hips were meeting my rhythm, so I upped the tempo. She matched it. Muscles strained and ached in my arm, but I carried on. I wanted to kiss her, lick her skin, capture her pert nipples in my mouth, but if I did, I would miss the moment where reality fades and blinding illumination takes over. I needed to watch her, watch her eyes, watch her mouth curve delectably as she came.

Sweat coated my body and lubricated our flesh allowing us to slip effortlessly faster and faster and faster. I could feel my own orgasm building, could feel it clambering inside my gut waiting to explode with her. Strong legs wrapped around me, clutching my body to hers, trapping my hand in the place it wanted to be. Inner walls were tensing, my fingers were moving against them with as much strength as they could. She was close: I was close. I knew what I had to do.

Curving my fingers, I felt for the spot that is hidden inside a lover. The smooth walls of her entrance changed as I pressed against the bump waiting for me to touch it. Pressing against it, I felt her stiffen, so I pressed more firmly. My hips were still moving between her legs, still inciting the connection of our bodies, still trapped within the circle of her strong thighs. Pulling my fingers forward, I watched with rapt fascination as her mouth opened, closed, opened, widened and emitted a yell that was almost animal. Then again - another shout - then another. Initially I didn't realise she was calling out my name, as I was too immersed in her cumming. If I thought she was beautiful before, I didn't know how to categorise her now. She was half sitting,

her mouth still parted, eyes blazing with sexual height. Perfect breasts pressed against my own, and our bodies had been paralysed by the moment. My fingers were still pressing on her g spot, and I knew if I were to move them, she would cum again. So I did.

Throwing her head back, it was as if she howled at the moon, the action making my vaginal walls contract, tipping me over the edge to howl along with her. The release was painfully beautiful, and as I fell forward I was caught in strong arms.

Laying there, my breathing erratic, I felt safe. I felt loved. Wanted. Needed. More emotions raced through me, emotions that I believed I would never feel again. Joy. Happiness. Connection. Completion. Here in the arms of this wonderful woman I had found my reason to live. It was as if I had been waiting for this moment for my entire life.

Her hands were stroking me. Calming me. Caressing and moulding me into anything she wanted me to be. I was hers. Hers. And I wanted her to always be mine.

Time passed, and still I covered her like a human blanket. I wanted to stay in this place of safety for the rest of my life. Could things get any better?

I felt her move, felt her shift her weight to one side. I knew she was looking at me, knew she was waiting for me to make eye contact. So I did. There, just above my face was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. Her features were relaxed, and part of me thought she was on the verge of sleep.

'I love you, Charlotte.' I could feel the words rattle through her chest as they hit the space between our mouths; knew these words were not a heat of the moment thing. It was her eyes that said it; the same eyes that were open and honest; those blue blue eyes that invited a response from me. One hand lifted and gently stroked the hair away from my face. 'I think I've always loved you.'

And at that moment I knew I had always loved her. So, I told her. Showed her, just as she showed me, over and over again. Loved her until I thought I couldn't make love to her anymore, but I still did.

I must've been dreaming, must've been thinking about what had happened in my life before I met her. It could have been I had been thinking about the events of the last week or so. Fuck knows. The reason why I'm telling you this is to explain why I said what I did.

Lying in her arms, the words seemed to slip out with no premeditated thought.

'Did you kill him?' I felt her stiffen beside me. 'Lucas Jefferies, I mean. Did you kill him?'

She moved away, and I felt air touch the side of my skin. Turning to face her, I tried to look into her face, but she was avoiding eye contact. 'Lucas who? I don't know who ...'

'The man who tried to rape me. Lucas Jefferies. Did you ...'

'I stopped him.' Dark hair spun as she whipped her head around to show blue eyes flashing in warning. 'He had to be stopped.' Helena sat up now, as if she was indicating the conversation was over.

'By killing him. That's how you stopped him, isn't it?' Helena was up and off the bed in a moment. It appeared as if her brain had told her to stand, and instantaneously she was on her feet and at the other side of the room. 'How? How did you stop him ... kill him ... get rid of the evidence?' Her face screwed and twisted, the words she wanted to say avoiding her. Whatever the reason had been for bringing this up, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she told me the truth, however unbelievable it was. 'Did you bite him?' What the fuck? Had I gone completely crazy?

'Bite him? Bite *who*?' In a flash she was beside the bed again, kneeling at the side and looking at me almost imploringly. 'Please, Charlotte. Don't.'

'Don't what? Ask you to tell me how you can read my mind? How you can move so quickly? How you are strong enough to carry me without crumpling?' Slender hands covered her face, and I heard a gasp from behind. I wanted to quit, wanted to tell her it didn't matter how Lucas Jefferies had been stopped. But I couldn't. I had to know. Lifting my hand I placed it on her cool skin. 'I love you, Helena. Whatever you tell me won't change that.' A muffled sob broke out. 'But I need you to tell me.' I swallowed. 'Are you a ...' What was I thinking? Here I was with the most captivating woman I had ever met, the same woman who had brought me out of my self-imposed prison, and I was on the verge of asking her if she was a fucking vampire. Maybe I wasn't as normal as I had been beginning to believe.

Hands pulled away to expose glistening blueness. Straightening, she tilted her head as if trying to read me. 'Yes. I killed him.' She swallowed before continuing. 'I ripped his throat out. Satisfied?' Shocked, yes. Satisfied? I'll stay with shocked. An image of Tina flashed inside my head, blood coating her throat. 'But not her. I didn't touch your friend. She did that all on her own.'

Standing, she turned as if to move away again, but I stopped her with a touch of my hand. I watched as her head fell forward, watched as she deliberated turning. Thankfully, she did.

'I want to be like you. Be with you always.'

Shaking her head, her face crumpled once again. In an instant she had me in her arms and was crushing me to her. 'No. I couldn't do that to you. Couldn't let you suffer like I do.' Even though she hadn't said it, she had admitted that she was something that people only believed happened in the imaginings of writers and film. At this precise moment I didn't care if I had in fact lost my mind. I didn't care if this was all being recorded in the padded cell of a mental hospital, because at this precise moment I was content to be here with her - in her arms. If being dead meant being alive, then so be it. Being with her allowed me to be more alive than I had felt in too long.

'But would you want me to suffer because I couldn't be with you?' A loaded question. A question that I would work on until she, too, believed that I needed to stay at her side whatever the cost.

Lifting my hand up, I cupped her jaw and pulled her face towards mine. Gently, I brushed my lips over hers and watched her eyes close momentarily. When they opened, I saw something lingering behind the blueness. Something that indicated that she was contemplating what I had said. All I had to do now was convince her that she wouldn't be taking my life, she would be making me live.

As you will remember, I told you I died when I was thirty three. I wasn't lying, wasn't spinning a yarn, as you may still want to believe. My 'Why are we here?' shortly followed by 'What's the point?' questions have been answered. When the time came to die, I did it almost exactly the same way as my parents. Well, I died in my bed anyway. However, unlike them, I knew I was going to die. I had asked for it. Countless times, actually. When I say I 'died', it wasn't as if I had actually left the land of the living. I'm still here - still watching you mortals go around in your safe little lives believing in only the possible.

Funnily enough, I can see the irony of it all now. When I was alive, I used to question life, death, and the impossible. Now I'm dead, yet alive, I know that the impossible can actually happen. I don't mean that now I know vampires exist. That's not it at all. What I'm trying to say, and badly, is now I know *love* exists. I never thought I would capture its elusive essence, never grasp the full content of its power, but I have.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying you have to be bitten by a vampire in order to find everlasting love. That would be stupid. What I am trying to splutter is that we must not just look towards the normal avenues, the safe places to find it. Love comes in many shapes, sizes, orientations, and colours, but it is still love, however much we mix it. Believing someone is just out of your grasp, or that love will never come stumbling to your door holding a still beating heart in its hands, is not the way to live the life you have. Shutting out the impossible is like stopping breathing. It stunts our ability to see clearly, shutting down our brains because we are not feeding it. We see the impossible happen all around us, but we accept it as normal. People surviving crippling diseases, surviving grief, surviving war, disability, hatred, and so the list goes on. We acknowledge there are things we don't quite understand, but we don't embrace that ignorance. We live alongside it hoping that we are never questioned about its existence. So why do some people readily accept there is a God? We can sense it, see evidence in creation, feel the power of faith, and we know there is something higher than us in the grand scheme of the 'Why are we here?' scenario. Is that hope for us all? A change in the way we race through life? A belief in something we can't actually see?

But can we *see* love? We can see the evidence of it, yes. But the actual thing? The abstract noun? In its own way, it's a little like believing in God. We can sense it, feel it, see it in the eyes and gestures of our loved ones, feel it in a touch ... a kiss ... hear it in a word. It is our higher being, our higher plane, our hope.

For me, it wasn't so much about God as about finding that intangible abstract noun. I had found it the night I had looked into the blue eyes of Helena Michaels. Being with her has enabled me to know for certain that love does exist. It is as physical as you or I. Amazing to think I had to believe in the impossible before I was granted the epiphany of life and all that surrounds it. Singlehandedly, she was my fin de siècle, as she closed the part of my life that had deteriorated, and allowed me to step forward into a period of hope and a new beginning. I love her. Love her more than I can possibly say. She is my answer to what's the point. She is my reason to be here. And I'm so glad to be dead.

Now that's something you don't hear every day.

The End

I hope you enjoyed this tale - I have to admit, I frightened myself on more than one occasion whilst writing this. If you did like her, let me know at fingersmith@hotmail.co.uk
If you want to check out my published works, you can find me at
<http://www.pdpublishing.com/smith.html>
