

CHARLAINE HARRIS

The Sunday Times Bestseller

*'Charlaine
Harris is a
phenomenon'*
SFX

Midnight Crossroad

From the Number One bestselling author
of the Sookie Stackhouse series



Everything
begins
at Midnight.



Midnight Crossroad

A brand new series from

CHARLAINE
HARRIS

Hello, Booksellers, Reviewers, Bloggers and Readers.

Yes, this really is Charlaine Harris, and yes, I'm really writing, though my friends at Orion have suggested some things you might like to know.

First, thank you. Thank you for believing in Sookie. For stocking, hand selling, promoting, reviewing, supporting and being a part of the success of this series. Thank you. Over 3 million copies of the Sookie Stackhouse series have been sold world-wide! The last three books in the Sookie Stackhouse series were No. 1 Bestsellers. Thank you for your tireless work to bring Sookie's story to so many readers.

Last year I finished the longest journey of my professional life. The thirteenth and final novel in the Sookie Stackhouse series arrived on the shelves. After I wrote the first book (DEAD UNTIL DARK), my agent struggled to find a placement for a book so quirky and, around at that time . . . very different. The only other person writing the mixture of adventure, comedy, and darkness set in an alternate world was Laurell K. Hamilton. So I estimate I wrote DEAD UNTIL DARK in 1997-1998. After two years, it found a publisher, and my career changed forever.

In real-life terms, my daughter was in the first grade when I began; she graduated from college as the series ended.

Sookie was my best fictional friend for a long time. I lived almost as much in Bon Temps as I lived in the real world, and my protagonist and her life were never far from me. But as the years wore on, I became aware that the time was approaching when I would have no more to say about her; when it was time to let her live her own life while I moved on to other things in mine. I was very aware that readers expected a lot from Sookie's adventures, and I didn't want to give them less

than my best. I reached the difficult decision to fulfill my final contract and to then move on to different projects.

And I won't say Sookie argued with me about it. If she were to speak to me, she'd say, "I'm okay now. You go do something else. We can take care of Bon Temps."

Once I'd reached that decision, and the last book had formed itself in my mind, I suddenly became aware that I was very excited about the prospect open to me: the thrill of doing something new and different, the creation of another world, or even many more worlds.

I literally didn't know where to start. It was like being in a great bakery where there are no calories.

But gradually, a place began to form in my mind, a desolate and isolated place, and I began to people that little town. First I brought in Manfred Bernardo, a character from the Harper Connelly books. I'd always wanted to write more about Manfred. Then I thought about Bobo Winthrop, from the Shakespeare books, now older and wiser and more worldly. So Midnight, Texas, became populated with characters from every series I'd written, though some of them won't reveal themselves until the second book. I framed MIDNIGHT CROSSROAD as a mystery with a few supernatural elements.

The road to Midnight was a rough one, since the book is told in the third person, from alternate points of view, some of them male. I'd written primarily in first person, from a woman's point of view, for over thirty years, so the change was huge. I wanted something new. I got it, though I had my share of challenges along the way, and learned more and more about the characters as I got into their heads. As always, this is for my readers. I hope you like this new world and its people.

Charlaine Harris



MEET THE CHARACTERS
OF MIDNIGHT, TEXAS



MANFRED

New in town, phone and internet psychic
Manfred Bernardo is a man with secrets.
Looking for a place to carry on his work in private,
Midnight seems like the perfect respite from the
modern world. After all, this is a town where
no one inquires after your past.

FIJI

Loveable Fiji runs the new age magic store and is just a bit hopeless. Her hair is impossible to tame, her clothes never seem to create quite the outfit she meant to wear and her love life is so quiet you can hear the crickets chirping.

But Fiji has a secret of her own.

One that can literally freeze people in place.
And just wait until you meet her cat, Mr Snuggly.





BOBO

Landlord extraordinaire, Bobo runs
Midnight Pawn, an unlikely hang out for the
residents of Midnight. By day customers come
in to pawn a TV, necklace or gun.
But at night, another type of customer
visits the pawn shop . . .

OLIVIA

No one is quite sure what Olivia does, exactly.
And that's probably for the best.





Welcome to
Midnight.

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You might pass through the town of Midnight without noticing it, if there weren't a stoplight at the intersection of Witch Light Road and the Davy highway. Most of the town residents are very proud of the stoplight, because they know that without it the town would dry up and blow away. Because there's that pause, that moment to scan the storefronts, maybe three cars a day do stop. And those people, more enterprising or curious (or lower on gas) than most, might eat at the Home Cookin Restaurant, or get their nails done at the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon, or fill up their tanks and buy a soda at Gas N Go.

The really inquisitive ones always go to Midnight Pawn.

It's an old building, the oldest building in town. In fact, it was there before the town grew up around it, before there were two roads to intersect. The pawnshop, situated at the northeast corner of the intersection, is stone, like most buildings in Midnight. Rock is easier to come by than timber in West Texas. The colors—beige, brown,

Charlaine Harris

copper, tan, cream—lend a certain charm to any house, no matter how small or ill-proportioned. Fiji (“Feegee”) Cavanaugh’s cottage, on the south side of Witch Light Road, is a prime example. It was built in the nineteen thirties; Fiji (“I’m named for the country; my mom and dad liked to travel”) doesn’t know the exact year. Her great-aunt, Mildred Loeffler, left it to Fiji. It has a stone-flagged front porch big enough for two large urns full of flowers and a little bench. There’s a low wall all around it, and rock columns hold up the porch roof. The large living room, across the whole front of the building, has a fireplace on the right side, which Fiji uses in the winter. The living room is now a shop/meeting place where Fiji holds her classes. Fiji is an avid gardener, like her great-aunt before her. Even at the beginning of fall—which is only a date on the calendar in Texas; it’s still hot as hell—the small front yard is overflowing with flowers, in large tubs and in the ground. The effect is charming, especially when her marmalade cat, Mr. Snuggly, sits like a furry statue amongst the roses, the ice plants, and the petunias. People stop and look, and read the prim, small sign that says, THE INQUIRING MIND on the top line, followed by CLASSES FOR THE CURIOUS, EVERY THURSDAY EVENING AT 7:00.

The Inquiring Mind, most commonly known as Fiji’s house, is on the east side of the Wedding Chapel and Pet Cemetery, run by the Reverend Emilio Sheehan. The Wedding Chapel is open (that is, unlocked) twenty-four/seven, but the sign at the gate of the fenced cemetery behind the chapel informs mourning pet owners that funerals are by appointment. Though his business is to the east of the Davy highway, the Rev’s home lies to the west, to the right of the Home Cookin Restaurant, which is past the closed hotel and the closed hardware store. The Rev’s house is similar to Fiji’s, but it’s older, smaller, and has only sparse grass in the little front yard. It is also in no way welcoming or charming, and he has no cat.

Midnight Crossroad

But back to Midnight Pawn, the largest occupied building in Midnight. The pawnshop has a basement, sort of, which is unusual in Texas. Digging through the rock is a job for the stout of heart, and the original owner of the pawnshop was a formidable individual. That basement is only partly under the ground level; the windows of the two apartments peek out above the hard-baked dirt like suspicious prairie dogs. Most of the time, the prairie dogs' eyes are shut, since the windows are heavily curtained. The main floor, up a set of four steps at the entrance, is the pawnshop proper, where Bobo Winthrop reigns by day. He has an apartment above the shop, a big one, taking up the whole floor. There are only light curtains over the windows in his personal space. Who is there to look in? There's nothing else that tall for miles. Bobo bought the house next door in a parcel with the pawnshop. It's intended for the owner to live in, but at the time he bought the place, Bobo thought he would be just as happy over the shop. He planned to rent the house for extra income. He did some necessary repairs and advertised for years. But no one wanted to rent the house until now.

Today, the house has a brand-new tenant. Everyone in Midnight (except the Reverend Sheehan; who knows what he thinks?) is excited because the new resident is moving in.

Fiji Cavanaugh peeks out from behind her lace curtains from time to time and then commands herself to go back to work behind the glass shop counter, which is filled with New Age-type merchandise: glass unicorns, fairy bookmarks, dolphins galore on every conceivable item. On the lower workspace built in behind the high counter, Fiji is mixing an herbal compound that should confound her enemies . . . if she had any. She is fighting the impulse to dig into the Hershey's Kisses she keeps in a bowl on the counter for her customers. (Her customers just happen to like Fiji's favorite candy.)

Across Witch Light Road, at Midnight Pawn, Bobo strolls down

the enclosed staircase from his apartment. At the pawnshop level, he has choices. There's a door to his left leading out to the driveway. There's a short open stairway down to the tenants' floor. And there's an inner door to the pawnshop on his right. Bobo should unlock it and enter, since the pawnshop has been closed since Lemuel went to bed a whole two hours before, but Bobo ignores it. He chooses the outer door, relocks it when he's outside, walks across the graveled driveway leading to the rear of the pawnshop, then over a little strip of downtrodden grass, then across the rutted driveway of the house next door, to offer help to the newcomer, a short, slim man who's unloading boxes from a U-Haul truck and sweating profusely.

"Need a hand?" Bobo asks.

The new tenant says, "Sure, some help would be great. I had no idea how I was going to get the couch out. You can take the time from the store?"

Bobo laughs. He's a big golden guy in his thirties, and his laugh is big and golden, too, despite the lines in his face and the expression of his mouth and eyes, which is mostly sad. "I can see if a car pulls in and walk back into the shop in less than thirty seconds," he says. In no time he's lifting boxes and putting them where the labels say they should go. Most of the boxes have "Living Room" scribbled on them, and they're heavy. The bedroom boxes are not so numerous, nor the kitchen boxes. There's furniture to move, really old furniture that wasn't that nice to begin with.

"Yeah," Bobo says, surveying the interior of the U-Haul. "You would have been up the creek without another pair of hands."

Joe Strong, with his little Peke on a leash, strolls over from the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon. He, too, offers assistance. Joe looks like his name. He's muscular in the extreme, and tan, though thinning brown hair and the lines around his eyes hint that Joe is older than his body suggests. Since Joe's obviously a great box lifter, the

Midnight Crossroad

new tenant accepts his help, too, and the job goes faster and faster. The Peke, Rasta, is tethered by his rhinestone leash to the front post of the porch, and the new tenant unearths a bowl from a “Kitchen” box and fills it full of water for the dog.

Looking out her front window, Fiji wonders if she should go over to help, too, but she knows she can’t carry as much as the guys. Also, Mr. Snuggly has an ongoing feud with Rasta; he would be sure to follow her if she crossed the road. After an hour of inner debate, Fiji decides that she will carry over lemonade and cookies; but by the time she gets everything assembled, the men have vanished. She steps out onto the street to see them heading down to the Home Cookin Restaurant. Apparently, they’re taking a lunch break. She sighs and decides to try again about three o’clock.

As the small party walks west on the north side of the road, they pass the pawnshop and cross the intersection. The Davy highway is wider and well-paved, the newcomer notices. They pass Gas N Go, waving at the middle-aged man inside. Then there’s an alley, and another vacant store, and next they’d reach the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon. But instead, they cross Witch Light Road to get to Home Cookin. The newcomer has been taking in the vacant buildings.

“Are there more people?” the newcomer asks. “Than us?”

“Sure,” Bobo replies. “There are people strung out along Witch Light and a few on the Davy highway, and farther out there are ranches. We see the ranch families and workers now and then. The few other people who live close, the ones who don’t run ranches, work in Davy or Marthasville. The commute is cheaper than moving.”

The new tenant understands that the core group of people of in Midnight is *very* small. But that’s fine with him, too.

When the men (and Rasta) come into the restaurant, Madonna Reed looks up from the infant carrier atop the ancient Formica

counter. She's been playing with the baby, and her face is soft and happy.

"How's Grady?" Joe asks. He brings the Peke in with him without any discussion, so the new tenant realizes Joe must do this often.

"He's good," says Madonna. Her smile switches from genuine to professional in a wink. "I see we've got a newbie today." She nods at the new tenant.

"Yeah, I guess we'll need menus," Bobo says.

The newcomer looks politely from Madonna to the other men. "You must come here often," he says.

"All the time," Bobo says. "We may only have one place to eat fresh-made food, but Madonna's a great cook, so I'm not complaining."

Madonna is a plus-size woman with an intimidating Afro. Perhaps her ancestors were from Somalia, because she is tall, there is a reddish cast to her brown skin, and her nose is thin and high-bridged. She is very pretty.

The newcomer accepts his menu, which is a single-sided typed sheet in a plastic envelope. It's a bit battered and obviously hasn't been changed in some time. Today is a Tuesday, and under the heading "Tuesday" he sees he has a choice between fried catfish and baked chicken. "I'll have the catfish," he says.

"What sides with that?" Madonna asks. "Pick two out of the three. The catfish comes with hush puppies." The sides for Tuesday are mashed potatoes with cheese and onions, slaw, and a baked apple with cinnamon. The new guy picks slaw and apples.

They're sitting at the largest table in the restaurant, a circular one set in the middle of the small room. It seats eight, and the newcomer wonders why they're at this particular table. There are four booths against the west wall, and two tables for two against the front window, which looks north over Witch Light Road. After looking

Midnight Crossroad

around, the new guy doesn't worry about hogging the big table any longer. There's no one else in the place.

A short Hispanic man walks in, wearing a crisp striped sport shirt and immaculate khakis with a gleaming brown leather belt and loafers. He's probably forty. He comes over to the table, kisses Joe Strong on the cheek, and slips into the chair by him. The new customer leans over to give Rasta a scratch on the head before he reaches across the table to shake hands with the new guy. "I'm Chewy Villegas," he says.

Not Chewy . . . Chuy. "I'm Manfred Bernardo," the new guy says.

"Did Joe help you get settled?"

"I'd still be moving furniture and boxes if he and Bobo hadn't shown up. There's not that much more to go. I can unpack in increments."

Chuy bends down to pet the dog. "How's Rasta been?" he asks his partner.

Joe laughs. "Ferocious. Scared Manfred to death with her vicious fangs. At least Mr. Snuggly stayed on his side of the road."

Though Chuy's eyes are marked by crow's feet, his hair does not show a trace of gray. His voice is soft and has a very slight accent, maybe more a careful choice of words, that indicates he was not originally from the United States. He seems to be as muscular as his partner.

A man in his sixties enters, an electronic chime on the door announcing his arrival. Like Chuy, he's of Hispanic origin, but otherwise the two men are nothing alike. The newcomer is cadaverous, and his skin tone is much darker than Chuy's caramel. There are deep creases in the older man's cheeks. He's maybe five feet five inches in his cowboy boots, and he's wearing a white shirt and an ancient black suit with a black Stetson. His only adornment is a string tie with a hunk of turquoise acting as a clasp. The older man

Charlaine Harris

nods politely at the group and goes to sit by himself at one of the small tables at the front window. He removes his hat, revealing thinning black hair. Manfred opens his mouth to ask him over, but Bobo puts a hand on Manfred's arm. "The Rev sits alone," Bobo says in a low voice, and Manfred nods.

Since he's sitting facing the window, Manfred can see a fairly steady stream of people going in and out of the convenience store. The two gas pumps are out of his range of sight, but he assumes that each person going into the store has a vehicle that is getting filled. "It's a busy time at the Gas N Go," he comments.

"Yeah, Shawn and Creek never come in for lunch. Sometimes for supper," Bobo says. "Creek has a brother, Connor—he's fourteen? Fifteen? He's at school in Davy."

"Davy is north of here?"

"Yes. A ten-minute drive. Davy's the county seat of Roca Fría County. The town's named for Davy Crockett, of course. 'Crockett' was already taken."

"So I'm guessing you're not from around here, either," says Manfred.

"Nope." Bobo doesn't amplify. This is a big clue, to Manfred. He's thinking it over when Madonna emerges from the kitchen to carry a glass of water over to the Rev and take his order. She's put glasses full of ice and pitchers of tea and water on the big table already.

Then Manfred spies a woman walking on the old sidewalk across Witch Light Road. She's passing the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon, though she barely glances at the CLOSED FOR LUNCH sign in the window. She's a showstopper. She's easily five foot nine, she's wearing jeans that show she is slim without being gaunt, and her orange sweater clings to square shoulders and thin, muscular arms. Though Manfred vaguely feels she should be wearing four-inch heels, she's not. She's wearing battered boots. She's got on a bit of makeup, and she's decorated with silver earrings and a silver chain.

Midnight Crossroad

“Damn.”

He’s not aware he’s said it out loud until Bobo says, “Be very afraid.”

“Who is she?”

“She rents one of my apartments. Olivia Charity.” Manfred is pretty sure that Olivia Charity is not the woman’s real name. Bobo knows her true name, but he’s not going to say it out loud. Curiouser and curiouser.

And then Manfred realizes that all morning, throughout the camaraderie of unloading the van, neither of his companions asked the obvious questions. *Why are you moving to such a godforsaken place? What brings you here? What do you do? Where did you live before?*

And Manfred Bernardo realizes he’s moved to the right place. In fact, it’s just like he belongs here.

1

Manfred succeeded in getting his computer equipment set up in less than two days. He started catching up on his websites Thursday afternoon. Time was money in the psychic business.

He was able to roll his favorite chair right up to the large L-shaped desk that dominated what should have served as the living room, the room facing Witch Light Road. His computer equipment was set up there, and there were filing cabinets that rolled up under the desk, though most of his files were online. Aside from the computer desk and chair, in an alcove there were two padded chairs with arms. He'd arranged them facing each other over a small round table, just in case he had a client in his own home who wanted a palm or tarot reading.

This seemed like the obvious and best use of the biggest room, to Manfred. He had no sense of decorating, but he had a great sense of utility. The big room had windows on three sides, all covered with ancient blinds. The blinds were useful but depressing, so he'd put up

Charlaine Harris

curtains to camouflage them. The ones he'd hung at the front were forest green and gold, the ones at the side overlooking the driveway were paisley patterned, and the set facing the next house to the east (which was empty) were solid red. Manfred thought the result was cheerful.

He'd placed his grandmother's love seat and an easy chair into the former dining room along with the TV on its stand, and he'd jammed Xylda's little dinette set into an alcove in the kitchen. His bedroom, which was reached through a door in the west wall of the kitchen, was very basic. With Bobo's help, he'd assembled the double bed and made it up with sheets and a bedspread. The bathroom off it, the only one in the house, was also basic, but large enough. There was a toolshed in the backyard, which he hadn't investigated. But he'd taken the time to make an exploratory trip to the biggest grocery store in Davy, so there was food in the refrigerator.

Manfred was satisfied that he was set up in his new place and ready to go back to work.

The first website he visited was the one dedicated to "Bernardo, Psychic and Seer." His publicity picture was half of the home page. He was wearing all black, naturally, and he was standing in the middle of a field with lightning coming out of his fingers. (Every time he admired the Photoshopped bolts, he thought of his lightning-struck friend, Harper.)

Bernardo, Psychic and Seer, had gotten 173 e-mails during the days he'd been busy with the move. He checked them quickly. Some of them were of the spam variety, and he quickly deleted them. Four were from women who wanted to get to know him intimately, one similar message was from a man, five were from people who thought he ought to go to hell, and ten were from people who wanted to know more about his "powers." He referred them to his biography, largely fictitious and obviously prominent on his home page. In

Midnight Crossroad

Manfred's experience, people were endlessly prone to ignore the obvious—especially people who were seeking help from psychics. Out of the 173 messages, he would answer the rest, but in his estimation there were only nine that might lead to money.

His duty done by the Bernardo visitors, he checked his “The Incredible Manfredo” website. If you used your credit card (or PayPal) to give fifteen dollars to Manfredo to answer your question, he would reply. The Incredible Manfredo was adept at discerning this answer “from beyond” and relaying that answer to the questioner over the Internet. The beyond was “the place from whence he received his awesome powers.” Many seekers were attracted to the Incredible Manfredo, a dark-haired, dramatically handsome man in his forties, judging by the picture on the website. He had 194 questioners lined up, and these people had paid. Responding to these took quite a bit longer, and Manfred thought about his replies carefully. It was impossible to use his true gift over the Internet, but he did use a lot of psychology, and he thought a television doctor could not have done better. Especially since most of the answers could be made clearer in a subsequent query for another charge of fifteen dollars.

After he'd spent three hours working on the “Incredible” website, Manfred made his third stop of the day, at his professional Facebook page under his full name, Manfred Bernardo. The Facebook picture was much slicker and played up his pale face, his platinum spiked hair, and the multiple piercings on his face. Tiny silver rings followed the line of one eyebrow, his nose was pierced, and his ears were scattered with silver rings and studs. He couldn't stomach gauges, but he'd had his rook pierced. He looked very dynamic, very intense. The photographer had worked well with him.

There were lots of messages and comments on his last posting, which read: “I'll be out of touch for a few days. It's time for me to

Charlaine Harris

retreat and meditate, to tune my psyche for the jobs ahead. When I'm back in touch with you, I'll have some amazing news."

Now Manfred had to decide what the amazing news would be. Had he received a great revelation from the spirits of those who'd passed beyond? If so, what would it be? Or maybe it was the right moment for Manfred Bernardo, Psychic and Seer, to make some personal appearances. That would be some amazing news, all right.

He decided that now that he was in Texas, fresh territory, he *would* schedule some one-on-ones, for a few weeks from now. These were taxing, sure, but he could charge a lot more for them. On the other hand, there was the expense of travel. He had to stay in a very good hotel, to reassure the clients that they were getting their money's worth. But it would feel good to touch the flesh a little, get the spark going again. He'd learned everything about the psychic business from his grandmother, and she'd believed in the power of personal attention.

Though Xylde had loved the concept of easy money to be made online, she'd never adapted to it; and really, she'd been more of a performance artist. He grinned as he remembered Xylde's appearances in front of the press during the last big murder case she'd worked. She'd enjoyed every minute of the publicity. Most grandsons would have found the old lady a source of acute embarrassment: her bright dyed hair, her flamboyant clothes and makeup, her histrionics. But Manfred had found Xylde a fountain of information and instruction, and they'd adored each other.

For all Xylde's fraudulent claims, she'd had flashes of the real thing. Manfred hoped she'd never realized that he was much more gifted than she'd ever been. He had a sad suspicion that Xylde had known this, but they'd never done more than refer obliquely to it.

Midnight Crossroad

Now they never would. He dreamed of her often, and she talked to him in those dreams, but it was more of a monologue than a dialogue.

Maybe she would pop up in one of his séances.

On the whole, he hoped she wouldn't.

2

A few days later, Bobo Winthrop was thinking about his new tenant when Fiji came into Midnight Pawn. Bobo was sitting in a comfortable chair probably crafted sometime around the turn of the century. It was made of dark, ornately carved wood with faded crimson velvet cushions. He'd been sitting in this chair for a month now, and he would miss it if the owner ever came back to redeem it. Of course, the guy should have taken it down to the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon, but he hadn't wanted to deal with "fruitcakes," as he'd so charmingly termed Joe and Chuy. After looking at the chair for twenty-four hours, Bobo had positioned it in front of one of the wooden posts that went from floor to ceiling. He'd put an old table by it. The chair seemed at home in the maze of the pawnshop, and he was not instantly visible from the front door.

"Bobo?" Fiji called. "You here?"

"In my chair," he said, and she began working her way through the furniture and assorted items that had been left there over the

Midnight Crossroad

years. Away from the front windows, the pawnshop was dim and dusty, with a lamp left on here and there to guide the visitor.

Bobo was pleased to see Fiji. He liked her freckles, and her gentleness, and her cooking. It didn't bother him that Fiji said she was a witch. Everyone in Midnight had a past, and everyone had a freaky side. Some showed it more than others. Backlit by the daylight streaming in the big front window, Fiji picked her way carefully through the decades of accumulated items that filled Midnight Pawn. She smiled when she reached Bobo.

"*Hola*, Fiji!" Bobo said, flipping a hand toward the rocker that he'd favored before he'd tried out the velvet chair.

She smiled even more happily after his greeting and sat her generously curved derriere in the rocking chair. "How are you, Bobo?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Good. And yourself?"

She relaxed. "Fine as frog's hair. What are you thinking about today?"

"My new neighbor," Bobo said promptly. He had never lied to Fiji.

"I took him some lemonade and cookies," she said.

"What kind of cookies?" Bobo asked, because to him that was the important point.

She laughed. "The sand tarts."

Bobo closed his eyes in exaggerated longing. "You have any left over?"

"I might have kept some back, after I had a good look at him. He didn't look like much of a cookie eater." In fact, Manfred's thin body had made Fiji all too conscious of her own curves.

Bobo slapped his stomach, which was still quite flat. "Not my problem," he said.

"No, it's not," she said dryly. "I'll bring 'em over later." Then she paused, just on the verge of saying something else.

Charlaine Harris

"Out with it," he said.

"I recognized him," she said. "Manfred."

His brilliant blue eyes opened wide. "From where?"

"From the newspapers. From *People* magazine."

Bobo sat forward, his lazy contentment destroyed. "Maybe you better tell me," he said, but he didn't sound excited. "I'm surprised you didn't come over before."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I . . ." She stopped dead.

"What?"

She looked as though she wished she'd sink through the floor. "You've had enough to deal with since Aubrey took off."

"You really don't need to coddle me, Feej," he said. "Women leave guys every day. I felt pretty damn bad about it, but she's gone and I haven't heard from her. Aubrey's not coming back." He forced himself out of the abyss always waiting to swallow him. "So what's the deal with Manfred?"

"Okay, then," Fiji said, shrugging. "He's a psychic."

Bobo began to laugh. "A phone psychic? No wonder he was so interested in the phone and Internet situation here. He must have asked me a dozen questions. I couldn't even answer all of them." Midnight was very fortunate in getting excellent cell phone service and Internet service, purely by chance. A division of Magic Portal, a major Internet gaming company, was located just close enough.

Fiji's lips tightened. "Ha-ha," she said flatly. "Listen, I know you're not a computer person, but Google his name, okay? You know how to Google, don't you?"

"I just put my lips together and blow?" Bobo said.

Fiji caught the reference, but she wasn't in the mood for jollity. "Bobo, he's the real deal." She wriggled uneasily in her hard wooden rocker. "He'll know stuff."

"You saying I have secrets he might reveal?" Bobo was still smil-

Midnight Crossroad

ing, but the fun had gone out of his eyes. He combed his longish blond hair back with both hands.

“We all have secrets,” Fiji said.

“Even you, Feej?”

She shrugged. “A few.”

“You think I do, too?” He regarded her steadily. She met his eyes.

“I know you do. Otherwise, why would you be here?” Abruptly, Fiji heaved herself out of the rocker. Her back was stiff, as if she intended to march out of the store. But instead, as he’d known she would, she wandered through the pawnshop for a minute or two before she left. Fiji always found it impossible to leave without looking at the pawned things in the store . . . on counters, on shelves, in display cases. Countless items, once treasured, sat in weary abandonment. Bobo was surprised to see her face turn a bit sad as she reached the door and cast one look back over her shoulder.

Bobo imagined that Fiji was thinking that he fit right in.

3

Manfred worked every waking hour for the next few days to make up for the time he'd lost moving. He didn't know why he felt impelled to work so hard, but when he realized he felt like a squirrel at the approach of winter, he dove into making the bucks. He'd found it paid to heed warnings like that.

Because he was absorbed in his work and had promised himself to unpack three boxes every night, he didn't mingle in Midnight society for a while after that first lunch with Bobo, Joe, and Chuy. He made a couple more grocery and supply runs up to Davy, which was a dusty courthouse town—as bare and baked as Midnight but far more bustling. There was a lake at Davy, a lake fed by the Rìo Roca Fria, the slow-moving, narrow river that ran northwest-southeast about two miles north of the pawnshop. The river had once been much wider, and its banks reflected its former size. Now they sloped down for many feet on either side, an overly dramatic

Midnight Crossroad

prelude to the lazy water that glided over the round rocks forming the bottom of the bed.

North of the pawnshop, the river angled up to hug the western side of Davy and broadened into a lake. Lakes meant swimmers and boaters and fishermen and rental cottages, so Davy was busy most weekends year-round, and throughout the week in the summer. Manfred had learned this from reading his Texas guidebook.

Manfred had promised himself that when he felt able to take some time off, he'd hike up to the Roca Fría and have a picnic, which the guidebook (and Bobo) had promised him was a pleasant outing. It was possible to wade the shallows of the river in the summer, he'd read. To cook out on the sandbars. That actually sounded pretty cool.

Manfred's mother, Rain, called on a Sunday afternoon. He should have expected her call, he realized, when he checked the caller ID.

"Hi, Son," she said brightly. "How's the new place?"

"It's good, Mom. I'm mostly unpacked," Manfred said, looking around him. To his surprise, that was true.

"Got your computers up and running?" she asked, as though she were saying, "Have you got your transmogrifinders working?" That shade of awe. Though Manfred knew for certain that Rain used a computer every day at work, she regarded his Internet business as very specialized and difficult.

"Yep, it's all working," he said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, the job is going all right." A pause. "I'm still seeing Gary."

"That's good, Mom. You need someone."

"I still miss you," she said suddenly. "I mean, I know you've been gone for a while . . . but even so."

"I lived with Xylida for the past five years," Manfred said evenly. "I don't see how much you could miss me now." His fingers drummed against the computer table. He knew he was too impatient with his

Charlaine Harris

mother's bursts of sentimentality, but this was a conversation they'd had more than once, and he hadn't enjoyed it the first time.

"You asked to live with her. You said she needed you!" his mother said. Her own hurt was never far below the surface.

"She did. More than you. I was weird, she was weird. I figured it would suit you better if I was with her."

There was a long silence, and he was very tempted to hang up. But he waited. He loved his mother. He just had a hard time remembering that some days.

"I understand," she said. She sounded tired and resigned. "Okay, call me in a week. Just to check in."

"I will," he said, relieved. "Bye, Mom. Stay well." He hung up and went back to work. He was glad to answer another e-mail, to respond to a woman who was convinced that he was both talented and discerning, a woman who didn't blame him forever for doing the obvious thing. In his job, he was nearly omnipotent—he was taken seriously, and his word was seldom questioned.

Real life was so different from his job, and not always in a good way. Manfred tugged absently on his most-pierced ear, the left. It was strange that he seldom got a reading on his mother. And really strange that he'd never realized it before. That was probably significant, and he should devote some time to figuring it out. But not today.

Today, he had money to make.

After another hour at his desk, Manfred became aware he was hungry. His mouth started to water when he wondered what was on the restaurant menu this evening. He'd checked the Home Cookin sign, so he knew the place was open on Sundays. Yep, time to eat out. He locked up the house as he left. As he did so, he wondered if he was the only one in Midnight who locked doors.

Before he could give himself the treat of a dinner he hadn't

Midnight Crossroad

cooked, he had to perform his social duty. He looked both ways on Witch Light (nothing coming, as usual) and crossed to Fiji's house. He'd been eyeing her pink-flowered china plate and her clear plastic pitcher in a guilty way since he'd washed them. He'd enjoyed the cookies and lemonade, and the least he could do was walk across the street to return Fiji's dishes.

The previous Thursday evening, he'd taken a break from work to watch the small group of women who came to Fiji's "self-discovery" evening. Manfred had recognized the type from his own clientele: women dissatisfied with their humdrum lives, women seeking some power, some distinction. There was nothing wrong with such a search—in fact, people searching for something above and beyond the humdrum world were his bread and butter—but he doubted any of them had the talent he'd seen lurking in Fiji when he'd opened the door to find her standing there in jeans and a peasant blouse, a plate in her left hand and a pitcher in her right.

Fiji was not what he thought of as his "type." It didn't bother him at all that she was older than he was; he found that suited him just fine, as a rule. But Fiji was too curvy and fluffy. Manfred tended to like hard, lean women—tough chicks. However, he had to appreciate the home Fiji had made for herself. The closer you got to the stone cottage with its patterned-brick trim, the more charming it was. He admired the flowers that were still burgeoning in the pots and barrels in Fiji's yard, despite the fact that it was late September. The striped marmalade cat known as Mr. Snuggly displayed himself elegantly under a photinia. Even the irregular paving stones leading to the porch were laid in an attractive pattern.

He knocked, since Fiji's place wasn't open on Sunday.

"Come in!" she called. "Door's open."

A bell over the door tinkled delicately as he went in, and he saw Fiji's unruly head suddenly appear over the top of the counter.

Charlaine Harris

“Hi, neighbor,” he said. “I came to return your stuff. Thanks again for the cookies and the lemonade.” He held out the plate and pitcher, as if he had to provide evidence of his good intentions. He tried not to stare too obviously at the shelves in the shop, which were laden with things he considered absolute junk: books about the supernatural, ghost stories, and guides to tarot readings and dream interpretation. There were hanging sun catchers and dream catchers. There were two mortar and pestle sets that were pretty nice, some herb gardening guides, alleged athames, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and other accoutrements of the New Age occultist.

On the other hand, Manfred liked the two squashy flowered armchairs sitting opposite each other in the center of the floor, a magazine or two on the small table between them. Fiji stood up, and he saw she was flushed. It didn’t take a psychic to tell she was really irritated about something.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, this damn spell,” she said, as if she were talking about the weather. “My great-aunt left it to me, but her handwriting was atrocious, and I’ve tried three different ingredients because I can’t figure out what she meant.”

Manfred had not realized that Fiji openly admitted she was a witch, and for a second he was surprised. But she had the talent, and if she wanted to lay herself open to judgment like that, okay. He’d encountered much weirder shit. He set down the plate and the pitcher on the counter. “Let me see,” he offered.

“Oh, I don’t mean to trouble you,” she said, obviously flustered. She had on reading glasses, and her brown eyes looked large and innocent behind the lenses.

“Think of it as a thank-you note for the cookies.” He smiled, and she handed over the paper.

“Damn,” he said, after a moment’s examination. Her great-aunt’s

Midnight Crossroad

handwriting looked like a dirty-footed chicken had danced across the page. "Okay, which word?"

She pointed to the scribble that was third on the list. He looked at it carefully. "Comfrey," he said. "Is that an herb?"

Her eyes closed with relief. "Oh, yes, and I have some growing out back," she said. "Thanks so much!" She beamed at him.

"No problem." He smiled back. "I'm going down to Home Cookin for dinner. You want to come?"

He'd had no intention of asking her, and he hoped he wasn't sending the wrong message (if a casual dinner invitation could be the wrong message), but there was something vulnerable about Fiji that invited kindness.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm out of anything remotely interesting to eat. And it's Sunday, right? That's fried chicken or meat loaf day."

After she locked the shop (now Manfred knew he was not the only one who continued his city ways) and patted the cat on its head, they walked west. Manfred had gotten into the habit of casting a glance down the driveway that ran to the back of the pawnshop. Though his view wasn't as good from the south side of the street, he did it now.

Because he was an observant kind of guy, Manfred had noticed soon after he'd moved in that there were usually three vehicles were parked behind Midnight Pawn. Bobo Winthrop drove a blue Ford F-150 pickup, probably three years old. The second car was a Corvette. Manfred was no car buff, but he was sure this was a classic car, and he was sure it was worth huge bucks. It was usually covered with a tarp, but Manfred had caught a glimpse of it one night when he was putting out the trash. The Vette was sweet. The third car was relatively anonymous. Maybe a Honda Civic? Something small and four-door and silver. It wasn't shiny new, and it wasn't old.

Manfred hoped the hot chick, Olivia, drove the Vette. But that

would be almost too good, like pancakes with real maple syrup *and* real butter. And who was the second tenant? Manfred thought the smart thing to do would be to wait until someone volunteered the information.

"How do you get enough traffic through the store?" he asked Fiji, because he'd been silent long enough. "For that matter, how does anyone in Midnight keep a business open? The only busy place is the Gas N Go."

"This is Texas," she said. "People are used to driving a long way for anything. I'm the only magical-type place for—well, I don't know how big an area, but big. And people crave something different. I always get a decent crowd on my Thursday nights. They come from forty or fifty miles away, some of 'em. I do some Internet business, too."

"You don't sell love charms or fertility charms out your back door?" he asked, teasing.

"Great-Aunt Mildred did something like that." She looked at him with an expression that dared him to make something of it.

"I'm cool with that," Manfred said immediately.

She only nodded, and then they were at the restaurant. He opened the door for her, and she went in ahead of him, her expression somewhat chilly, as far as Manfred could interpret it.

Home Cookin was practically bursting with activity this evening. Joe and Chuy were sitting at the big round table. There was a husky man with them, someone he hadn't met, jiggling a fussy baby. Manfred noticed cars far more than he did babies (and shoes and fingernails), but he thought this infant was the same size as the one he'd seen the first time he'd been in Home Cookin. That made the chances good that this was Madonna's baby; he figured the man was Madonna's, too.

As the electronic chime sounded and the door swung shut behind them, Manfred looked to his right. The two tables for two by the

Midnight Crossroad

front window were occupied, and one of the four booths on the west wall. Reverend Emilio Sheehan (the Rev) sat by himself at his usual table, not the one next to the door but the second one. And his back was to the entrance, a placement that practically screamed “leave me alone.” This evening he had brought a Bible to read. It lay open on the table before him. Two men, not natives to Midnight, were at the table closest to the door. They were preoccupied with their drinks and menus.

Though Manfred was sure he hadn’t met all the townspeople, he knew the family sitting in the U-shaped booth was also just passing through. The four of them looked too . . . too shiny to be residents. Mama had subtly streaked hair, breast implants, and expensive-casual slacks and sweater. Dad was wearing rich-rancher clothes (gleaming leather boots and a pristine cowboy hat). The kids—a boy about three or four, a girl maybe two years older—were looking around them for something to do.

“Excuse me!” the mother called to Madonna, who was pouring tea for Chuy. “Do you have some colors or games for the children?”

Madonna turned to regard her with astonishment. “No,” she said. After she put the tea up on the counter, she vanished into the kitchen.

The mom gave the dad a significant look, as if to say, *I don’t like this, but I’m not going to rile the natives*. Manfred deduced it was some planning error on the dad’s part that had led to this unlikely family eating dinner at Home Cookin. He did not think the dad was going to get to forget about it for a couple of days. However, the family cheered up when Madonna brought out their dinner plates on a huge tray. The food looked good and smelled wonderful. Madonna had help tonight: Manfred caught a glimpse of someone moving around in the kitchen when the swinging doors were open. As the family began to eat, the restaurant grew quieter.

Charlaine Harris

Manfred and Fiji had taken seats at the big round table—he in the same chair he'd had before, facing the front door, and Fiji by the man holding the baby, with an empty chair or two between her and Manfred. Maybe she was more steamed about his selling-spells remark than he'd thought. Joe and Chuy said hello to Manfred, but they could hardly wait to tell Fiji about a woman who'd brought in an old book for Joe to look at. Manfred gathered that the book was an account of witches in Texas in the early part of the twentieth century.

Madonna's man was putting a bib on the baby and seemed pretty busy with the process, so Manfred put off introducing himself. While he waited, he evaluated the newcomers by the door. The two strangers at the small table fit in a bit better than the affluent family. They were both wearing worn jeans and T-shirts. Their boots were scuffed. The taller of the two, a dark-haired man, was wearing an open plaid sport shirt over his tee. His beard and mustache were neatly trimmed. The smaller man had medium brown hair; he was clean-shaven. Manfred set them in their early thirties.

The opening of the two swinging doors into the kitchen attracted Manfred's gaze. He only had to turn his head to the right to see the girl who emerged from the kitchen carrying two salads. Manfred's attention was instantly riveted. His eyes followed her as she crossed the room to the two men by the door. She set the salads in front of them, returned to the counter to get two packages of dressing, and took the packages back to the table along with a basket of crackers. Manfred knew the people at his table were talking, but they might as well have been making paper chains for all he knew.

Fiji was talking baby talk to the child, so Manfred leaned to his left. "Chuy, excuse me. Who's that? The girl serving?"

After a moment, it dawned on Manfred that the conversation at his table had stopped. He looked at Chuy, beside him, then at Fiji,

Midnight Crossroad

Joe, and the dark man with the baby. They were all regarding him with some amusement.

"That's Creek Lovell," Chuy said, his grin broadening.

"Her dad owns the Gas N Go on the other corner," Fiji said. "By the way—Manfred, meet Teacher." She nodded at the dark man.

"Good to meet you. How's the little . . ." And he stopped dead. For the life of him, he couldn't remember if the baby was a boy or girl. "Grady!" he said triumphantly.

"Good save, man," Teacher said. "Till you have 'em, they're hardly top of your list. Yeah, this is Grady, he's eight months old, and I do handyman work. So if you need some home repairs, give me a call."

"Teacher can do anything," Joe said. "Plumbing, electric, carpentry."

"Thank you, my friend," Teacher said, with a blinding smile. "Yes, I'm a handy guy to have around. I help Madonna out here, and every now and then I work for Shawn Lovell over at the gas station, when he just has to have a night off. And I fill in for Bobo, too. Call me if you need me." He fished a card out of his pocket and slid it across the table to Manfred, who pocketed it.

"I'm not good with anything but the most basic hammer jobs myself, so I'll be doing that," Manfred said, and then reverted to a more interesting topic. "So, how old is Creek?" he asked. His attempt to sound casual was a dismal failure; even he knew that.

Joe laughed. "Not old enough," he said. "Or, wait, maybe she is. Yeah, she graduated from high school last May. We gave her a gift certificate to Bed Bath and Beyond, so she could get stuff for her dorm room. But apparently she's not going to college, at least not this semester. You know why, Fiji?"

Fiji's forehead wrinkled. "Something was wrong with their loan application, I think," she said, shaking her head. "Something didn't come through with the financing. She's still hoping that'll get

straightened out, even if her dad's lukewarm about her leaving. I feel bad for Creek; she didn't go to college, her puppy got killed, and her dad watches every move those kids make. A girl as young and smart as Creek doesn't need to be hanging around Midnight."

"True," Manfred said. Though height was not a major issue with Manfred, he was pleased to note that Creek was at least two inches shorter than he was. Her black hair was just down past her jawline, all one length, and it swung forward and backward with every step she took. Her skin was apparently poreless and clear, her eyebrows smooth dark strokes, her eyes light blue.

She was not really thin. She was not really curvy. She was just right.

"A word to the wise," Chuy said. "Don't let Shawn see you looking at his baby girl that way. He takes his job as her dad pretty seriously." All the men at the table were smiling, and even Fiji looked amused.

"Of course he does," Manfred said, breaking himself out of his trance. "And I don't mean any disrespect," he added. Was it disrespectful to hope someday he would be naked with Creek Lovell? And was it even more disrespectful to pray that it would be sooner rather than later?

"How old are you?" Joe asked.

"Twenty-two." Almost twenty-three, and it felt strange to try to minimize his age, rather than stretch it.

"Oh." Joe digested that. "You're closer to her age than anyone in town." He met his partner's eye. Chuy shrugged. "May be a good thing," he said. "Manfred, keep in the front of your mind the fact that all of us like the girl and none of us want her hurt."

"It's at the top of my list," Manfred said, which was not completely true. The way she walked, smooth and even, *that* was at the

Midnight Crossroad

top of his list of things he noted about Creek Lovell. He reminded himself that she could have attended her senior prom only months ago . . . which went some way to quell the involuntary physical reaction he had when he watched her cross the room. *Some way.*

It was not quite full dark outside, and the family of outsiders had finished their meat loaf and fried chicken. The little girl was beginning to pick on her younger sibling, and the mom was casting desperate looks toward the kitchen. Madonna was cooking, to judge from the sounds of pots and pans and the sizzle of frying, and Creek hurried out with the plates of the two men sitting together. She put them down, gave the men an impersonal smile, and scurried over to the booth to take the payment tucked into the black plastic folder the dad was extending.

Just after the sun set, the bell over the door chimed as Bobo walked in with a man Manfred had never seen. As Manfred had noted before, his landlord was lucky enough to have a pleasing color palette; his hair was golden blond, his eyes were bright blue, his skin was a golden dusky tan. And he was tall, robust. His companion was more like—Bobo, bleached and dried and shrunken. Instead of blond, his hair was platinum: the same shade as Manfred's, but the newcomer's hair was natural. His eyes were a pale, pale gray. His skin was . . .

"White as snow," Manfred whispered, remembering the old fairy tale Xylda had read to him. "His skin was white as snow."

Joe glanced at Manfred and nodded. "Be cool," he said, very quietly. "That's Lemuel."

Manfred planned on being cool as cool could be, since he wasn't sure exactly what Lemuel was—but no one had given Nice Normal Family the same memo. The children fell silent as the newcomer glanced around the room. He smiled at the children, who looked

terrified. At least they were too frightened to speak, which was almost certainly a good thing. The two visitors kept their eyes down on their plates after a quick glance upward, and they very deliberately did not look up.

The Rev didn't even stop reading his Bible.

"This is beyond weird," Manfred said in a voice no louder than a whisper, but the bleached man looked at him with a smile.

Good God, Manfred thought. He had a ridiculous impulse to jump to his feet and interpose himself between the bleached man and Creek Lovell, but it was really fortunate he didn't act on that. Creek returned with the family's change, and after she placed it on their table, she flung her arms around the bleached man's neck—which Manfred wouldn't have done for any amount of money—and said, "I haven't seen you in so long, Uncle Lemuel! How are you?"

Released from their table by Creek's return, the mom and dad gathered all their belongings and shepherded the two kids, still openmouthed and staring, out the door of the Home Cookin Restaurant as quickly as possible. Manfred followed them with his eyes. Once outside, the mom stood on one side of the car, gripping the daughter's hand, the dad on the other side with the boy in his arms. They spoke to each other briefly and intensely across the hood of the car before piling in and speeding away.

"Uncle" Lemuel (if he was Creek's uncle, Manfred was an insurance salesman) gingerly embraced the girl and gave her a kiss on the hair. Lemuel was not any taller than Manfred, and even more slightly built, but his presence was bigger than his body. The eye could not pass over Lemuel; it was caught and fascinated. Manfred thought, *I could have skipped getting all this body art if I'd dyed myself dead white*, but he knew that he was simplifying.

The two strangers by the window had finally looked up now that

Midnight Crossroad

Lemuel's back was to them. They looked determined not to flee or flinch. The scene seemed frozen for a long moment, and then Lemuel's eyes met Manfred's and held. It was like being fixed in place by an icicle.

Bobo started forward, gently nudging his companion, and the connection was broken. *Thank God*, Manfred thought, an acknowledgment he didn't make very often.

In seconds Bobo and Lemuel had seated themselves, Lemuel at Manfred's right and Bobo in the seat between Lemuel and Fiji. *I can almost feel the cold coming off him*, Manfred thought, and turned to look welcoming. He registered that the girl Creek had hustled over to ask the two men by the door if they needed anything, before pausing by the Rev's table. After that she buzzed over to find out what Bobo would like to drink, and Manfred got to enjoy her nearness, but his pleasure was muted by Lemuel's proximity.

After opting for the fried chicken, Bobo said, "Lemuel, meet the newest guy in town. Manfred Bernardo, meet my basement tenant, Lemuel Bridger."

"Pleased to meet you," Manfred said, extending his hand. After a slight pause, Lemuel Bridger gripped it. An icy chill ran up Manfred's arm. He had to fight an impulse to yank his hand from Lemuel's and cringe back in his chair. Out of sheer pride, Manfred managed to smile. "Have you lived here long, Lemuel?"

"Almost forever," the pale man answered. His eyes were fixed on Manfred, intense with interest. "A real long time."

His voice was not anything like Manfred had expected. It was deep and rough, and Lemuel's accent was just a bit unfamiliar. It was definitely a western accent, but it was like a western accent interpreted by someone from another country. Manfred was on the verge of asking Lemuel if he'd been born in America, when he remem-

bered that asking personal questions was not the style in Midnight—and he'd already asked one. Lemuel released his hand and he lowered it into his lap casually, hoping the feeling would come back soon.

"How are you going with your box schedule?" Bobo asked Manfred. "Still opening three a day?" He was smiling a nice warm smile, but Manfred knew that Bobo was not a happy man in his heart.

"I have a day left," Manfred said. (He'd realized long ago that most often you had to react to what was on the surface.) "Then I'll be done. My bad luck that all my files and paper stuff must be in one of the last three boxes."

"You don't go by what's in them?" Joe said. Creek was smiling, just a little, to Manfred's pleasure.

"Nope. I just open the next three boxes in the stack," Manfred confessed. He could read the complex of thoughts on Fiji's face: She had the impulse to tell him she would have helped; she had the awareness he didn't need or want her help; she made the decision to keep her mouth shut.

His grandmother had taught him how to read faces, and because of his natural aptitude, it hadn't taken long to develop his skills. While Fiji was an easy subject, and Bobo, too, Creek had depths and undercurrents. Joe and Chuy registered as agreeable and warm, but reserved. Lemuel was as opaque as a wall. Manfred struggled not to turn to his right to stare at his new acquaintance.

Lemuel, meantime, seemed just as interested in Manfred as Manfred was in him. He stared at Manfred's eyebrow, the one that had so many rings in it that the hair was hard to see. Since a few of Manfred's tattoos were visible in his short-sleeved T-shirt, Lemuel spent some time examining those, too. Manfred's right arm was decorated with a large ankh, and his left with a lightning bolt, his newest embellishment.

Midnight Crossroad

“Did that hurt?” Lemuel asked Manfred when the conversation about the weather and Manfred’s move had been exhausted.

“Absolutely,” Manfred said.

“Did you need to get ’em for your job, or you just like ’em?” The pale gray eyes in the snow-white face were fixed on him curiously.

“A combination,” Manfred said. He felt compelled to be honest. “They’re not exactly necessary for my job, but they make me stand out more, seem more interesting and alien, to the people who hire me. I’m not just another smooth con man in a suit.” It felt strange to be telling so much truth.

Lemuel waited, obviously aware he’d not gotten the whole answer. Manfred felt like he’d lost the brakes on his conversational car as he continued, “But I did pick symbols I liked, ones that had a personal meaning. No point in getting tattooed with dolphins and rainbows.”

From Fiji’s sudden, deep flush, Manfred was sure she had a little dolphin tattooed somewhere and that she had felt very dashing at getting inked. He liked the witch a lot, but he couldn’t seem to avoid stepping on her toes.

To Manfred’s relief, Creek came to take their order, and not only did he get to break eye contact with Lemuel, he got to look at Creek some more: a win-win situation.

Like everyone else, he glanced at the door when the bell tinkled.

Olivia Charity had arrived. It was interesting, when Manfred thought about it later, the difference between Olivia’s entrance and Lemuel’s. Or maybe it was not the entrance that made the difference—both of them had just walked in, no posing, no attitude. It was the reaction of the Home Cookin patrons. When Lemuel had joined them, wildness and death had walked in the door, though the drama inherent in that statement made Manfred uncomfortable. When Olivia stepped inside, it was sort of like the first appearance

Charlaine Harris

of Lauren Bacall in an old movie. You knew someone amazing and interesting had entered the room, and you knew she didn't suffer fools gladly.

Olivia registered everyone in the room as she strode to the round table. Manfred didn't think she missed a thing. As she took the chair opposite him, the one between Chuy and Teacher, he stared. It was the first time he'd seen her up close. Her hair was a reddish brown, almost auburn, but he suspected that was not her natural color. Her eyes were green, and he was sure they were colored by contact lenses. She was wearing ripped jeans and a brown leather bomber jacket that looked as soft as a baby's cheek, and underneath it she wore an olive green T-shirt. No jewelry today.

"You're the new guy, right?" she said. "Manfred?" Her voice was not a western voice; if he'd had to guess, he'd have said Oregon or California.

"Yep. You must be Olivia," Manfred said. "We're next-door neighbors."

She smiled, and immediately looked five years younger. Before the smile, Manfred would have estimated her age at maybe thirty-six, but she was not that old, not at all. "Midnight is so small that everyone here is a neighbor," she said, "even the Rev." She inclined her head toward the old man, who had not turned to look to see who had come in.

"I've never talked to him," Manfred glanced at the Rev. The small man had put his big hat on the other side of his table while he ate, and the overhead lights glinted off his scalp. But there were only a few strands of gray in the remaining hair.

"You may never talk to him," she said. "He likes to keep his thoughts and words to himself." And because Manfred was watching Olivia so closely, he noticed that while her head was turned in the Rev's direction, she was actually looking at the two men by the door.

Midnight Crossroad

Then she glanced at Lemuel. Their eyes met, and she gave a tiny tilt of her head in the direction of the strangers' table.

The strangers were studiously minding their own business, but in a way that seemed a little too obvious to Manfred.

Creek hustled out of the kitchen then. "Sorry, Olivia, I was getting another meat loaf out of the oven," the girl said. While Olivia was choosing her food, Manfred realized that while everyone else at the table had ordered, Creek had not asked for Lemuel's selection. Manfred opened his mouth to say something about the omission, then thought the better of it. Lemuel would speak up if he wanted something. Manfred was fairly sure Lemuel did not eat, anyway.

It wasn't long before Madonna and Creek brought out the plates. Teacher had finished feeding Grady some plums from a Gerber jar, and he handed the child over to Madonna, who carried him off into the kitchen while the people of Midnight enjoyed their meal. Manfred, who had never been too particular about food, was deeply impressed with Madonna's cooking. After a lot of meals spent by himself, he actually enjoyed passing salt and pepper, butter, and rolls. The flurry of little activities that constituted a communal meal felt pleasant.

He also liked watching Creek move around the room, though he warned himself not to look at her too often. He didn't want to be creepy.

Olivia talked about an earthquake in East Texas, Fiji commented on how late the county garbage truck had been this past week, and Bobo told them a man had come in the afternoon before, trying to pawn a toilet. A used one.

Because he was curious about the two strangers, Manfred cast a glance in their direction several times during the meal. Since he was facing their table, he could do that without being obvious. They had ordered coffee and dessert (cherry pie or coconut cream pie), and

they were *lingering*. In Manfred's experience, silent men didn't dawdle over food. Talking women might, talking men maybe. Silent men paid and left.

"They're watching someone here, or they're waiting for something to happen," he murmured.

"Yes, but which?" Lemuel replied, in a voice so low it was almost inaudible.

Manfred hadn't been aware he was speaking out loud, and he had to check his startle reflex. He choked on a bite of yeast roll, and Lemuel offered him a drink of water, his eyes distantly amused.

Everyone at the table tried to look away discreetly while Manfred recovered himself. It was a relief when he could say, "Went down wrong. Fine in a second!" so they could all relax and resume their conversations. A cold hand against the back of his neck was a help, oddly, and the fact that Creek looked concerned as she carried the empty bread basket back to the kitchen.

Yeah, Manfred thought. 'Cause choking guys look soooo cool.

"What do you think?" Lemuel said, in the voice that nearly wasn't there.

Manfred turned his head a little to look into the eyes that were exactly the color of—wait, he nearly had it—the color of snow and ice melting over asphalt, a cold gray. "I thought they must be watching you or Olivia," he said, though he couldn't get as close to silent as the creature next to him. He managed well enough that Joe (to his left) didn't hear him but kept up his conversation with Chuy about Chuy's cousin's upcoming visit.

"That's what I thought, too," said Lemuel. "Which one of us is the target, do you reckon?"

"Neither," Manfred said, in a normal voice, and then hastily looked away and brought his volume down to extra-low. "They're watching Bobo. They're interested in you and Olivia because you're his tenants."

Midnight Crossroad

Lemuel did not reply. Manfred was sure he was chewing over this idea, seeing if it could be digested.

"Because of Aubrey, maybe," Lemuel said, just when Manfred was sure the topic was concluded.

"Who's Aubrey?" Manfred asked blankly.

"Not now," Lemuel said. He tilted his head very slightly toward Bobo. "Some later time."

Manfred patted his lips with his napkin and put it by his plate, which was still half full. He'd eaten enough. He wondered if Lemuel would suddenly pounce on the two strangers and kill them in some horrific way. Or maybe Madonna would charge out of the kitchen with a cleaver in her hand and fall upon them.

It seemed possible in Midnight.

"Ridiculous," he muttered.

"What?" said Chuy, across Joe.

"The amount I've eaten is ridiculous," Manfred said. "You'd think I was a starving dog." Too late, he noticed his half-full plate contrasted with Chuy's empty one.

Chuy laughed. "I always figure if I only eat here two or three times a week and I'm careful all my other meals, I'm okay," he said. "And you'd be surprised how many times I have to lift things in the store . . . plus, taking turns with Joe walking the dog, and doing yard work. I keep telling myself I need to start jogging, but Rasta won't pick up the pace when we're out." And Chuy was off and running . . . about the dog.

Once Rasta was the topic of conversation, Manfred didn't have to say a word. He'd observed that a small percentage of pet owners are simply silly about their pets, especially the owners who don't have human kids in residence. Part of that silliness lay in assuming other people would find stories about the pet as fascinating as the owner did. But (Manfred had always figured) there were a lot worse things to make false assumptions about.

Charlaine Harris

For example, he found it far more pleasant to think about a little fluffy dog than to wonder what two strangers were doing at Home Cookin. Two *lurking* strangers. And it was far better to consider Rasta's history of constipation than the cold hand gripping his own under the table. When Joe turned to ask Chuy a question about a television show they'd watched, Manfred was left alone with his acute anxiety.

He didn't want to offend the terrifying Lemuel, but he wasn't used to holding hands with a guy. Manfred liked to think of himself as cool and comfortable with all sexual orientations, but the grip Lemuel had on his fingers was hard to interpret. It was not a caress, but it didn't seem like a restraint, either.

So Manfred took a sip of his water left-handed and hoped his face wasn't all weird.

"Manfred," Fiji said, "do you watch a lot of television?"

She was trying, very kindly, to draw him back into the conversation, since Joe and Chuy had transitioned from the dog's bowels to an argument about *Survivor* with Teacher.

"I have one," Manfred said.

Even Olivia laughed, though Manfred noticed that while he'd been preoccupied with Lemuel, she'd edged her chair out from the table, perhaps so she could rise quickly. She'd also told Joe and Chuy she sided with Teacher on the *Survivor* issue (whatever it was), and she'd angled her chair to align with Teacher's, so she could see the men by the door without turning her head too much.

"She has a gun," Lemuel said in that voice that was audible to Manfred alone.

"I figured," Manfred said. He was feeling unaccountably tired. Suddenly he figured it out. "You *leeching*?"

"I'm sorry, yes." Lemuel turned his head to look at Manfred. His flaxen hair brushed his collar. "I am a bit unusual."

Midnight Crossroad

"No shit," Manfred muttered.

Lemuel smiled. "Absolutely none."

"Don't they have a bottle of blood here for you? Wouldn't that help?"

"I can't tolerate the synthetics. They come up as fast as they go down. I can drink the real stuff in any method of delivery. Energy is just as good."

"You got enough, now? Think you can let go?"

"Sorry, fellow," Lemuel whispered, and the cold hand slid away.

Manfred thought, *I feel like a pancake that's been run over by a tank*. He wasn't sure he could get up and walk out of the restaurant. He decided it would be a sound idea to sit right where he was for a few minutes.

"Drink," said the sepulchral whisper, and he carefully reached for his glass of water. But the white hand interposed a glass of a dark beverage full of ice. Manfred put it to his lips, discovering the glass contained sweet tea, very sweet tea. Normally he would not have been interested, but suddenly that seemed like exactly what he'd been longing for. He drank the whole thing. When he put down his empty glass, he caught sight of Joe's startled face.

"Thirsty," he said brusquely.

"I guess so," Joe said, looking a little puzzled and concerned.

Manfred felt much better after a moment or two.

"Eat," whispered Lemuel. Though his hands were still a little shaky, Manfred now finished his dinner completely. His plate was as bare as Chuy's.

"I got my second wind," he said sociably to Chuy and Joe (though why he had to cover for Lemuel, he couldn't have expressed in words). "I think I missed lunch, too. I'm going to have to watch that."

"I wish skipping meals was my problem," Joe said, patting his gut. "The older I get, the more my metabolism slows down."

Charlaine Harris

That sparked a discussion about treadmills that engaged the whole table. Manfred was only obliged to look attentive. He wanted to leave, so he could get back to his house and think about what had just happened—decide if he was angry at Lemuel “borrowing” from him, if he was cool with it, or if he should make an “okay for one time but don’t do it again” speech. At the same time, he was sure he needed to sit for a while longer.

Everyone at the table had finished eating now, and only Bobo ordered coffee. Teacher ordered cherry pie, and at Lemuel’s urging Manfred got the coconut pie. Creek brought it to him. She was as pleasant with him as she was with everyone else—no more. *But no less*, he told himself.

Well, he hadn’t ever imagined it would be easy to make an impression on her, even though he was the only male close to her age in Midnight. A girl as amazing as Creek would know she had plenty of options just down the road.

And that was what flipped him over to the “cool with it” option about the incident with Lemuel. Creek liked Lemuel well enough to call him Uncle. So she wouldn’t be disposed to date anyone who publicly freaked out about Lemuel being an energy-sucking vampire.

Manfred was relieved to find a practical reason for doing what he instinctively felt was the right thing. After all, if you live next door to an apex predator, you shouldn’t go around poking him with a stick.

Fiji rose to depart, and a chorus of protests went up. (This group was as clannish as it was disparate, Manfred thought.) “Guys, I have to get home and feed Mr. Snuggly,” she said, and there was a collective groan. She raised her hands, laughing. “Okay, it’s a silly name, but I inherited the name along with the cat,” she said. “I think he’s gonna live forever.”

Midnight Crossroad

Bobo, Chuy, and Joe began a mild argument about how long Mildred Loeffler had owned Mr. Snuggly before she passed away. Fiji lingered long enough to chip in some solid information. The vet's records indicated that Mr. Snuggly had lived with Mildred for a year before her demise, that he had been a kitten when Aunt Mildred had taken him in for his first shots; that set the cat's age at four years. "So Mr. Snuggly's in the prime of his life," she finished, and putting a careful ten dollars by her plate, she left.

There seemed to be no moon that night. The plate glass windows were filled with blackness. "Should I walk back with her?" Manfred asked in a low voice. "Or would that be, you know, sexist?"

"That would be sexist," Olivia said. She smiled around the table. "But I'll step outside to watch until she gets to her house."

Manfred didn't believe for one minute that Olivia's real purpose was to ensure Fiji's safe journey back to her cottage. Fiji was safe, and Olivia knew it. Manfred was sure Olivia was going to the door to examine the two strangers more closely.

What a complicated evening it had turned out to be. "Is every evening here like this?" he asked Lemuel.

"Oh, no, never before," Lemuel said. He seemed quite serious.

Joe and Chuy had been arguing over whose turn it was to walk Rasta, whom they'd left at home, so they didn't hear Lemuel's remark. But Bobo looked at him quizzically. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Lemuel said. He smiled at Bobo. Most people would have found this terrifying, but Bobo smiled back, perfect white teeth flashing in a tan face. Bobo would be comfortably handsome the rest of his life, Manfred realized, and tried not to be envious.

The Rev made as silent a departure, leaving his plate quite clean and not waving good-bye to anyone. As he passed Olivia at the door, he patted her shoulder. Olivia did not speak, nor did he. After she'd

stood in the doorway for approximately the time it would take for a woman to get to her cottage after crossing the Davy highway, Olivia returned to the table.

The two men by the door had eaten all their pie and drunk all their coffee. Creek had come by the table twice to see if they needed anything else, and she'd left the bill between them on her second pass. Still the two were exchanging idle comments, as if they'd realized they had to justify their presence at the table.

Finally, Madonna came out of the kitchen and rang the bell on the counter. "Guys and gals, I love being a social center for this little town, but I need to get Grady and Teacher home, and I need to watch me some television. So you all clear out and let us close up."

You can't get any more straightforward than that, Manfred thought.

Those who hadn't paid got out their wallets. Manfred noticed that the two strangers paid Creek in cash before they slipped out the door, watched closely by Olivia, Lemuel, and Manfred.

"They're all wrong," Manfred said to Lemuel. He watched as Olivia left the diner by herself, moving quickly and neatly.

Lemuel's snow-slush eyes regarded him briefly. "Yes, young man, they are." Madonna was standing by Teacher, holding Grady, who was heavy-eyed. Lemuel rose and stepped away to pat the baby on the head. Grady didn't seem to mind Lemuel's chilly touch; a pat on the head and a smile was all it took to make the baby gleeful. He stretched out a little hand to Lemuel, who bent to give it a quick kiss. Grady waved his arms enthusiastically. Lemuel drifted closer to the door. Though Manfred hadn't noticed Madonna and Grady tense at Lemuel's attentions, he did notice when they relaxed.

Abruptly, Manfred felt foolish. Why had he been so concerned? Two men he'd never seen had eaten in a restaurant and lingered in a somewhat odd way. Lemuel had held his hand. Why should he worry about either of those things?

Midnight Crossroad

As Manfred rose to take his own departure, a bit shakily, he thought about his sudden change in attitude. Had his physical proximity to Lemuel affected his judgment? Was his reversion to “everything is probably okay” a valid viewpoint, or some kind of mild euphoria induced by Lemuel’s leeching?

Lemuel turned to give Manfred one last enigmatic look before he left the Home Cookin Restaurant.

Bobo, exchanging good nights with Joe and Chuy, seemed oblivious to any undercurrent in the evening . . . and so did the rest of the Midnight people. The strangers had (Manfred assumed) piled into their pickup and driven off, never to be seen again. But as Manfred walked past the area between his house and the pawnshop, he saw that the anonymous silver car was gone.

He suspected strongly that Olivia Charity was following the strangers.

And he thought, *It would be interesting to know why they were here. And why Lemuel is different from other bloodsuckers. And—who’s Aubrey?*

Then Manfred reminded himself that he was here to work, and to work hard. He was planning for his future. The problems of these people were not his problems.

But he thought about those people until he went to sleep that night, all the same.

4

Two mornings after that, Fiji sat on her small back porch, looking at the herb garden with some satisfaction. She'd put in an hour's work this morning before breakfast, and she felt satisfyingly relaxed and pleased with her labors. She was wearing her oldest jeans and a torn sweatshirt stained with the results of a long-ago painting project, its sleeves hacked off to elbow length. In her stadium chair, her feet propped up on her weeding stool, Fiji was utterly comfortable. She had a big mug of tea and a blueberry scone on the little table beside her.

This was as good as it got, and she had a whole hour and a half before the shop opened to enjoy it.

If she hadn't felt so content and comfortable, she'd have gone in to get her camera to take a picture of the cat. Mr. Snuggly was curled picturesquely on a flat paving stone. The slanted morning sun warmed his striped orange fur to show up golden against the green of the plants and the dark brown of the stone.

Midnight Crossroad

She couldn't be bothered to get up. She took a mental picture, to hold forever. She surveyed the pile of weeds with some satisfaction. "I'm just amazing," she told Mr. Snuggly, who looked up at her without moving his head.

"Yes, you are," said Bobo, and Fiji jumped and made a sound like "Eeep!"

"Sorry," he said, his smile dazzling. "I didn't mean to scare you. I knocked on the shop door, but when you didn't answer I figured you were back here. Want me to go away?"

Fiji *never* wanted Bobo to go away. Keeping him from knowing how much she craved his company was her problem, not how to get rid of him. "No, fine, come sit," she said, mortified at how lame she sounded. "Want a cup of tea? A scone?" She had had plans for the second scone, but she would gladly give it to Bobo. Maybe not the one sitting on her plate, but the second one . . . sure.

"That would be great, if you have extra," he said hopefully, and took the second chair after Fiji removed her gardening gloves from the seat. Once inside, Fiji flew around her little kitchen. It only took a moment to prepare his tea and to arrange his scone on a little plate with a pat of margarine and a knife to spread it.

"You do everything nice," Bobo said, looking at the pale green cup and dish.

Fiji glanced down at her paint-stained sweatshirt. "Not everything," she muttered.

Her guest took a big sip of his tea and a bite of the scone. "How's your house?" he asked, after he'd had a good look at the garden and the cat, appreciating both. "You need anything fixed?"

He's so damn nice, she thought. Why didn't I get a fixation on a plain man?

She scoured her mind for some fix-it job for Bobo. "The Formica on my kitchen counter," she said. "There's like a strip around the

edge of the counter? And it's getting loose at one end. Probably you just glue it back on, right? With superglue?"

Bobo brightened. "Hot glue would be better. Got a hot glue gun?"

"I don't think so," Fiji said. "I'm not too crafty." *In any sense*, she thought, with some regret.

"I'll bring mine over," he said. "I have to track it down. I'll call."

"That's well worth the scone." She made herself relax, tilting her head back and closing her eyes. She had to teach herself to not to tense up when Bobo was around. "I'm so glad it's cooling off in the daytime. At least a smidgen. You know what we ought to do? We ought to plan a citywide picnic day, now that it's slightly less brutal weather."

"Citywide?"

"Yes." Fiji was firm. "*Townwide* sounds too podunk; *hamletwide* sounds too precious. Everyone in Midnight, even the Rev, should come. We'll all bring some food, walk over to the Rio Roca Fria, and have a fall picnic. The restaurant is closed on Monday. So are the pawnshop and the salon. A potluck picnic would be fun."

"You think Shawn and Creek and Connor would come? Shawn's open every day."

"Surely Shawn could do without Creek for a couple of hours, and Connor could get out of school a little early? Or maybe Teacher would stay at the gas station. There's not *ever* a time when *everyone* is off work. I thought about Sunday, but that's Madonna's big day at Home Cookin, and Rev would never come then, though his service is over early. Starts at nine thirty, but he's usually done in half an hour."

"He has a church service? Where?"

"In the chapel," she said, astonished that no one else in Midnight seemed to have learned this. "Where else? He has a nondenominational service in there every Sunday morning."

Midnight Crossroad

Bobo gaped at her. "I had no idea. And it's not on the sign. Does anyone ever go to it?"

"I do, pretty often. Though I'm not exactly a Christian. Once in a blue moon, someone else will come, someone he's helped. But hold on, we've gotten off-topic. Let's circle back around to the picnic plan."

"That might be a nice outing. I haven't hiked over there in a long time. Since . . ." His voice trailed off.

Since before Aubrey left you. She restrained herself from gritting her teeth and growling. "We ought to do it. That would be nice for the new guy. Manfred."

"You like him?" Bobo asked.

Fiji looked at him uncertainly. Was Bobo teasing her? Did he seriously believe she would enjoy, at twenty-eight, having a crush on the new kid in school?

After a second, she decided there were no overtones. Bobo was making a casual inquiry . . . at least, she was fairly sure. "He seems okay," she said. "Unusual job, unusual guy. Lemuel sure took a shine to him."

"Really?" Bobo looked surprised. "Huh. That's good, I guess."

She nodded. "I thought so."

"Too bad Lem can't go to the picnic, then." Bobo appeared to be considering. "Nah, we couldn't have it at night," he concluded. "There's no light out there at all. Even if we went on a full-moon night, it would be too dark to hike out there. Picnics are a daytime thing."

"So we just need to pick a day and ask people," she said. "What about next Monday? A week from yesterday? I'll ask around."

"Sure, great," Bobo said. He did seem to be a little happier. "I can bring the beer and some soda." He looked down at his watch. "I better go open the store. Not that anyone hardly ever comes in this early."

"Lem still working five nights a week?" Midnight Pawn was open from nine in the morning to six at night, then eight at night until six in the morning, six days a week. It was closed for twenty-four hours on Sunday. On Monday, Teacher took the day and Olivia took the night shift, if it suited them, but more often than not the pawnshop was closed on Monday. That gave Bobo and Lemuel two days and nights off.

"We're thinking of hiring someone," Bobo said. "This piecing Monday together as we go is getting old. We need someone reliable, someone who can maybe come in at other times when we're busy. But yeah, Lemuel is always there on five nights. Sunday and Monday nights off."

"I wonder what Lemuel does when he's not working," Fiji said. "On his times off." There was a moment of silence. "Better not to know, I guess."

"Yeah. Better not."

Fiji hesitated. She wanted to ask, *Did you ever wonder if he knew anything about what might have happened to Aubrey?* But she didn't speak. *He would have asked Lemuel if the thought had occurred to him, because he's just that transparent,* she thought.

After Bobo went back to Midnight Pawn, Fiji propped her feet up again with a sigh, though it was more regretful than contented. In a moment, she'd have to give up her garden and her comfort and get cleaned up for work, but usually work was enjoyable, if not exactly fun. And she had the picnic to look forward to. But her thoughts about Aubrey had stirred up an unpleasant nest of feelings.

Fiji had not liked Aubrey Hamilton; in fact, she'd loathed her with an intensity almost amounting to hate. Guilt stirred in Fiji's gut as she remembered all the bad energy she'd sent Aubrey's way. Had she ever wished Aubrey was gone, never to be heard from again? Sure, many times . . . in fact, every time she'd watched Aubrey cling

Midnight Crossroad

to Bobo's arm and strop herself all over him. And then Aubrey had actually done just that. She'd disappeared.

Because most of the residents of Midnight were quite perceptive, Fiji had never discussed Aubrey with any of them, before or after the vanishing. She knew her dislike would be easy to read . . . if they hadn't picked up on it already. Instead, she'd cast a spell. If it worked, everyone in Midnight should have been able to perceive Aubrey's true nature; but if the other Midnighters had suddenly opened their eyes to Aubrey's awfulness, not one of them had mentioned it.

And now no one would, because Bobo was miserable that Aubrey had left him, and everyone loved Bobo.

Fiji frowned at Mr. Snuggly. For the first time, she realized that in her thoughts she'd been putting Aubrey in the past tense. Bobo might be grieving because she'd left him, but Fiji could tell he also lived in anticipation of the day when Aubrey would return to her senses and come back to Midnight, to Bobo.

Fiji didn't believe that was going to happen. She didn't think she'd ever see Aubrey again.

As it turned out, she was wrong.

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