

# Midnight Crossroad

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# Midnight Crossroad

CHARLAINE HARRIS

GOLLANCZ  
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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,




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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.

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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 six 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 walks down

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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



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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 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

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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 an apple.

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

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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 his 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

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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.

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“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 voice it. 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 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



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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 in the former dining room, along with the TV on its stand, and he'd jammed Xylde'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



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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 Manfred” website. If you used your credit card (or PayPal) to give fifteen dollars to Manfred to answer your question, he would reply. The Incredible Manfred 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 Manfred, 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

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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 Xylida 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 Xylida'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 Xylida a fountain of information and instruction, and they'd adored each other.

For all Xylida'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 Xylida had known this, but they'd never done more than refer obliquely to it.



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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.