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Opening Extract from...

Day Shift

Written by Charlaine Harris

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To the readers who are kind enough to follow me wherever I may go

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It isn't the rumbling of the trucks that seizes Manfred Bernardo's attention; it is the silence that falls when their ignitions die. Big trucks often go through Midnight, slowing to stop for (or speeding up to beat) the traffic light at the intersection of the Davy highway and Witch Light Road. Since Manfred's rented house lies on Witch Light Road, he's grown used to the sound until it is simply background music. But the absence of that sound pierces his preoccupation. He's on his feet and opening the front door before he's aware of pushing back from his desk. He grabs a jacket from the rack by the door.

Glancing across the road, he sees his friend Fiji Cavanaugh come out into her front garden, which is at its bleakest in January. It's cold today, by Texas standards, but sunny. Her cat, Mr. Snuggly, a golden tabby, is at his current favorite sunning spot, the base of the pot where Fiji plans to try a gardenia. Even Mr. Snuggly is staring west.

Manfred exchanges a nod with Fiji, who is bundled in a quilted

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coat. He notes that today she has inexplicably arranged her hair in two dog-ears, like a six-year-old. Then he turns his attention back to the trucks. One is an equipment truck, and it's laden with building supplies: boards, bricks, electrician's wire, plumbing pipes, hardware. Two battered white vans have disgorged a clown-car number of small brown men, wearing hoodies they will surely discard as the day warms. Emerging from a Lexus, clearly in charge, is a tall white woman in tan slacks and a blue silk T-shirt. She's wearing a faux-fur vest. Her thick brown hair is gathered back into a sleek ponytail, and she wears silver earrings and a silver necklace. She also wears glasses, with big square tortoiseshell frames, and her lipstick is an aggressive red.

All these various vehicles, with their assortment of passengers, have converged around the defunct Río Roca Fría Hotel at the southwest corner of the intersection. As far as Manfred knows, it has been closed for decades. The work crews immediately start pulling the boards off the doors and windows and tossing the ancient plywood into a large skip that yet another truck has deposited on the cracked sidewalk. The workmen swarm into the dark interior of the hotel.

It reminds Manfred of a giant boot kicking a dormant anthill.

Within five minutes, Fiji has crossed the road to join him. Simultaneously, Bobo Winthrop saunters down the steps of his business and residence, Midnight Pawn, which is situated at the same intersection as the Río Roca Fría Hotel but catty-cornered to it. Manfred sees (with resignation) that Bobo is looking quietly handsome today, though he's wearing faded jeans and an ancient T-shirt with an equally ancient flannel shirt open over it. Manfred and Fiji stand with Bobo, and as they do, Manfred sees that west of the intersection, Teacher Reed has come out of Gas N Go; it's directly across the highway from the pawnshop on the east and the hotel on the south.

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His statuesque wife, Madonna, is standing on the sidewalk in front of the Home Cookin Restaurant with Grady, the baby, who's wrapped in a blanket. She's holding Grady with one arm, shading her eyes with the other. Across the street from Madonna, Joe Strong and Chuy Villegas have stepped out of the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon. Joe is like his name: muscular. He looks as though he may be forty. Chuy is shorter, his dark hair is thinning a bit, and his skin is the color of toast.

Even the Rev, in his rusty black suit, emerges from his white-painted chapel to cast an unreadable look at all the activity.

We're only missing Olivia and Lemuel, Manfred thinks. Of course, Lemuel cannot come out during the day, and Olivia is gone on one of her mysterious business trips.

After a few more minutes of watching and wondering, Joe Strong takes the initiative and strolls across Witch Light Road. He threads his way through the busy men to Boss Woman, who appears to be looking over some plans on a clipboard—though Manfred is sure, reading the clues in her stance, that she is well aware of Joe's approach.

Boss Woman turns to face Joe and extends her free hand to shake his, a professional smile pasted on her face. She is able to look Joe directly in the eyes, Manfred observes. She seems to like what she sees. The well-groomed Joe is pleasant looking and has a warm manner. His mouth moves; her mouth moves. They grin at each other without sincerity. Manfred thinks, *It's like watching a ritual.* In his peripheral vision, he spies the Rev retreating into his chapel, but the rest of the Midnighters stay outside.

Bobo turns to Manfred. "Had you heard anything about this?" he asks.

"No. Believe me, I would have spread the word," Manfred tells his landlord. "This is a big thing, right?" He is aware that he feels

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ridiculously excited by this development in the small town where he's lived for less than a year. *Rein it in,* he advises himself. *It's not like the circus has come to town.*

And yet, in a way, it's exactly like that. Fiji's round, pretty face reflects his curiosity. Her eyes are lit up.

"What do you think?" she says, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "They're going to reopen the hotel, huh? How can they even get it back up to code? It's been closed so many years. Everything will need to be ripped out and replaced. Plumbing, electricity . . . floors . . ."

Bobo nods. "I've been in there. Right after I moved here, Lem and I went in one night. There was a loose board at the back, and Lem pried it open. We had flashlights. He just wanted to show it to me."

"What was it like?" Manfred asks.

"Spooky as hell. The old reception desk with all the pigeonholes for mail is still there. The light fixtures were just hanging down with all these cobwebs on 'em. Like a horror movie. High ceilings. Wallpaper coming off in shreds. Smelled like mice. We didn't even go to the second floor. The stairs were a death trap." He smiles. "Lem remembered it when it was open. He said it was pretty nice then."

Lemuel is well over a century and a half old, so it is not surprising that he can remember the hotel in its heyday.

"So why would anyone spend the money to renovate it?" Manfred says out loud, since that is the question on all their minds. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to build a Motel 6 if you felt like Midnight could support a hotel?"

"Who wants to spend the night *here*?" Fiji asks, another question they've all thought about. "There are three motels in Davy if you go north, and at least six over in Marthasville if you go west. If you go to the interstate, there are a skadillion places to stay. Besides, Home

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Cookin isn't open for breakfast." It's the only restaurant within fifteen miles.

They contemplate all those facts in silence.

"How many rooms in that hotel?" Manfred asks Bobo.

Bobo looks down at him, blue eyes narrowed in thought. "I wouldn't think more than twelve," he concludes. "The ground floor is the lobby and the kitchen and the dining room, plus there was an ancient phone booth, don't know when that went in . . . and there weren't bathrooms in the rooms . . . so, say four guest rooms on the ground floor plus a bathroom and the public rooms, and then eight on the second floor plus two bathrooms? And the third floor was storage and staff rooms, Lem said."

Fiji grabs Bobo's arm. "You said dining room?"

"Yeah," Bobo says, surprised by her agitation. "Oh. I get it. The Reeds."

"I don't know how Home Cookin keeps open, anyway. Really. Think about it. How?" Manfred spreads his open hands as he asks them.

But Bobo and Fiji ignore Manfred's question. They are just glad to have a good cook like Madonna in Midnight.

"If they *don't* open the dining room . . ." Bobo says.

"It'll be a good thing." Fiji ends his thought. "Home Cookin will be busy, Gas N Go will be busy, and maybe even Joe and Chuy will sell more antiques and do more nails."

"Huh," Manfred says. "That would be all right." Though he really feels he doesn't want anything to change in Midnight, he makes himself admit that a touch of prosperity would be good for the town. His own business is done by telephone and Internet and does not depend on foot traffic.

Manfred's cell phone rings, and he whips it out of his pocket. He

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doesn't have to look at the caller ID to know it's Joe, whom he's watched walking back to Chuy.

"We need to have a meeting tonight," Joe says without preamble. "Maybe Fiji can go ask the Rev, and Bobo can tell Lemuel. Is Olivia in town?"

"I don't think so. What time?"

"Here at the shop, whenever it's really dark." There's a muffled sound while Joe asks Chuy a question. "Seven o'clock good?"

"Fine, I'll tell them."

"See you then."

Manfred ends the conversation and passes along the message.

"I'll tell the Rev, but you can't ever predict what he'll do," Fiji says with a shrug.

"I'll put a note downstairs for Lemuel," Bobo says. "He'll see it the minute he gets up. Maybe Olivia will be back by then."

That night, when the work crews have gone and the tall woman, too, the inhabitants of Midnight assemble in the Antique Gallery and Nail Salon. Occasionally, they can hear Rasta yapping upstairs in the very nice apartment Joe and Chuy share. "I thought he might wake up Grady," Chuy explains. "He'll calm down in a second."

Sure enough, Rasta falls silent after everyone has filtered in. The salon area is the front right corner of the store, and the antiques, dusted and arranged attractively, take up the rest. Joe has assembled some folding chairs and an old love seat around a refreshments table. He and Chuy have made lemonade and tea, and there are a couple of bottles of wine. They've put out a cheese and cracker tray. Fiji has brought a bowl of toasted, salted pecans. Manfred tries one to be polite, then finds it hard to resist grabbing a handful.

When they all have drinks and food, they choose seats.

Madonna and Teacher settle on the love seat, with baby Grady

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drowsing on Madonna's chest. Madonna is regal and a little scary, and she's never been especially friendly. Her husband, Teacher, who is running Gas N Go until another buyer is in place, is the town handyman. Teacher is good at everything. Since he's been working at the convenience store full-time, projects are going undone in the town, and everyone is ready for a return to the status quo, including Teacher. Grady has started pulling up and will begin walking, and Madonna's already worried about cooking at the restaurant with him staggering around.

Joe stands in front of the motley assortment of chairs on which they've perched and begins, "Here's what I know."

They all fall silent and look attentive.

"The woman in charge is Eva Culhane. She's not the owner. She's his or her agent. I don't know who the real owner is, she was real close-mouthed about that. Here's what she told me. The hotel is going to reopen as a hotel. But the eight small rooms on the bottom floor will be made into four suites with their own bathrooms, and four rooms on the upper floor will get the same treatment. These will be residence rooms."

There is an intake of breath because so many people have questions.

"Wait," Joe says. "Wait!"

There's a little laughter, but they are all too curious or anxious to be very amused.

"The residence rooms will be for people who are in the area for a long-term job, like working for three months at Magic Portal. Or people who are waiting to get into an eldercare situation. As an aside, Eva Culhane told me that there's a waiting list for all the eldercare places in a sixty-mile radius. The remaining rooms will be conventional hotel rooms. In the family quarters, there'll be two people living there as staff. A cook will provide breakfast for residents and

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whoever stays at the hotel. Lunch and dinner will be cooked for permanent residents only, is what I got out of it."

Madonna's shoulders relax visibly. She gets a few diners from Magic Portal, which is an Internet company, every month. (Thanks to Magic Portal, Midnight has great Internet.) And ranchers come into Midnight every now and then for a meal. But she's in the room with her regulars, right now. More customers would be welcome. Elderly people like traditional food, which is what Madonna cooks.

"What kind of staff?" Fiji asks.

"There'll be two people in residence," Joe repeats.

"Will one of them be a nurse or some kind of medical person?" Bobo asks. "Sounds like they might need that. And they'll have to hire a maid, I would think. That's a lot of rooms to clean for one person, plus dishes, plus food prep."

"Good questions. We'll have to find out." Joe looks a little chagrined he didn't think of all this.

"Did Ms. Culhane give you a timetable?" Fiji asks.

"She said they hope to be open within six months."

There's a moment of silence.

"They must have a shitload of money," Teacher Reed says, and Bobo nods. "That's a quick turnaround."

Olivia, who'd driven in an hour earlier, speaks for the first time. She is sitting with Lemuel the vampire, her lover, and she looks exhausted. They are all ignoring the fact that Olivia's shoulder is obviously bandaged under her shirt. "We have to find out who owns the company doing the restoration," she says.

"Manfred, can you dig that up?" Joe asks.

Manfred is the most computer savvy of all the Midnight residents, but he's no hacker. He just knows his way around the Internet. "I can try," he says. Joe hands him a brochure, one that Eva Culhane had given him. It has a corporation name on it, MultiTier Living.

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Olivia extends her hand silently, and Manfred hands it to her. She looks at the brochure intently before she hands it back.

When everyone has said everything they have to say (some more than once), Lemuel supports Olivia with his arm as they leave Joe and Chuy's store/salon. The remaining Midnight residents go their separate ways: Teacher, Madonna, and the sleeping Grady cross the street to walk past Home Cookin Restaurant and behind it to their double-wide, the Rev splitting off from them to go right to his bleak little cottage. He has not spoken during the whole meeting, but he has eaten cheese and crackers and the toasted pecans.

The people who live east of the Davy highway (Bobo, Manfred, Fiji) walk together, Fiji carrying a plastic container with the remaining pecans. Fiji hands the container to Bobo. "You and Manfred split those," she says. "I've got some more at home." She looks both ways before she crosses Witch Light Road. The golden tabby cat, Mr. Snuggly, is waiting for her, and Bobo and Manfred watch the woman and the cat go in the front door. Bobo says, "Hold out your hands." Manfred pulls a real cloth handkerchief from his pocket and holds it ready to catch half the salted pecans. Gathering up the corners, he nods his thanks, and Bobo splits away to go into the side door of the pawnshop, which leads to the stairs going up to his apartment.

Manfred unlocks the front door of his little house, which he rents from Bobo. He passes by his huge curving desk, crowded with computer equipment, to go through the little den (designed as a dining room) and back into the kitchen. He's full and not really thirsty, but he decides to have a cup of hot chocolate before he goes to bed, and he pulls out the extra blanket. He feels unaccountably chilled by the advent of the new people, and he wants to be warm tonight.

The next morning, Manfred sits at his computer and types "Multi-Tier Living" into his search engine. He reads the resultant description, which is too broad to be satisfying. MultiTier offers housing of

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all sorts, including "residence inns," and long- and short-term care facilities for the elderly and recuperating . . . at least those who don't require skilled nursing care. Manfred wades through all the bland verbiage and pictures of healthy-looking people of a certain age who are smiling at their attentive caregivers or relaxing in their small apartments. Finally, he finds another name, Chisholm Multinational.

When he searches for it, the website he finds is impressive and almost frightening in its scope. Chisholm Multinational has so many divisions he could wander through its website for hours. It's like an octopus. One tentacle is all about hotels and medical facilities: regular hotels on the high end, rehabilitation centers, nursing facilities for the care of Alzheimer's patients or people suffering from mental health issues or people going through the ravages of cancer.

Another tentacle contains various construction companies. Manfred can see that connection; you might as well build all these various structures, right? Yet another tentacle deals with janitorial work. Again, logical. You have to clean all those buildings you've erected to hold travelers and sick people.

He pushes away from his desk and decides he needs a cup of tea. He has to admire the person at the head of Chisholm Multinational, who he gathers is the grandson of the founder. He wonders if this man has any idea what all the branches of his company are doing . . . or where Midnight, Texas, is. He imagines some group of suits gathered around a large map, peering at the tiny pinpoint that is Manfred, the Rev, Fiji, Bobo, Chuy, Joe, the Reed family . . . the population of this almost-ghost town.

He feels a frisson of distaste, almost fear.

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