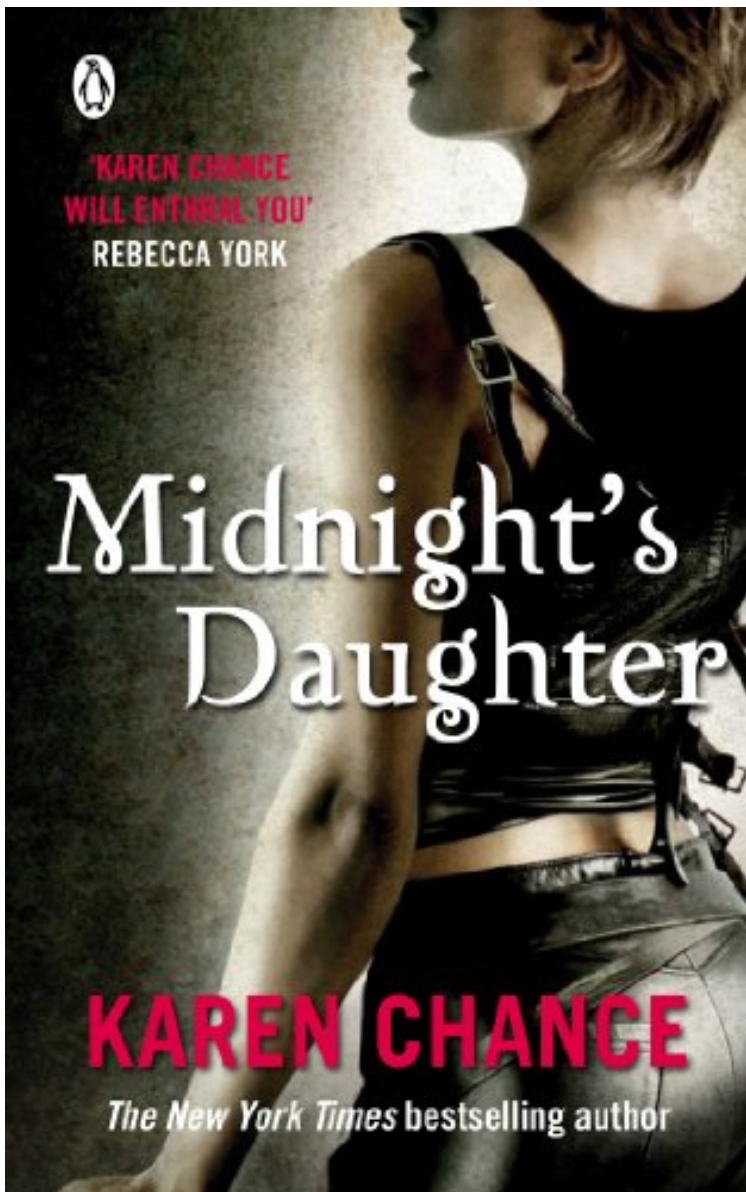


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Midnight's Daughter



Par Karen Chance
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDorina Basarab is a dhampir, the daughter of a vampire and a human woman. Subject to uncontrollable rages, most dhampirs are born barking mad and live very short, very violent lives. So for five hundred years, Dory has been fighting to maintain her sanity by unleashing her homicidal tendencies on those demons and vampires who deserve killing. But now Dory's vampire father has come back into her life.

Her uncle Dracula, notorious even among vampires for his cruelty and murderous ways, has escaped from prison, and her father wants Dory to work with the gorgeous vampire dueling champion Louis-Cesare to put him back there. Vampires and dhampirs are mortal enemies, and Dory prefers to work alone. But Dracula is

the only thing on earth that truly scares her, and when Dory has to go up against him, she'll take all the help she can get.

Chapter One My least favorite dead guy had his feet up on my desk. I hate that. His boots were probably cleaner than my blotter, but still. It showed a lack of respect. I pushed the offending size tens onto the floor and scowled. "Whatever it is, the answer's no." "Okay, Dory. Your call." Kyle was looking amiably never a good sign. "I should've known you wouldn't care what happened to Claire. After all, there's not likely to be any money in it" he paused to glance around my rat-hole of an office "and you don't appear to be in a position to do anything gratis." I had been on the way to my feet to haul his undead ass out the door, but at his words I slowly sat back down. Kyle was a real lowlife, even for a vamp, but once in a while he heard something useful which explained why I hadn't yet given in to temptation and staked him. And where Claire, my roommate and best friend, was concerned, I'd take anything I could get. She'd been missing for almost a month, and I'd already gone through every lead I had. Twice. Before loser boy showed up, I'd been about to start through the file a third time in case I'd somehow missed something, even though I knew I hadn't. And every hour that passed made it less likely I'd be pleased with what I found at the end of the search. "Talk," I said, hoping he'd make me beat it out of him. I had a lot of pent-up frustration that needed to go somewhere. But, of course, he decided to find some manners. Or what passes for them in our circle. "Word is, she's alive. I thought she'd have been juiced and packed up for sale by now, but talk on the street is that she wasn't kidnapped at all." By "juiced" he meant a disgusting black-arts process in which a projective null, a witch or wizard capable of blocking out magical energy for a certain radius, is made into a weapon known as a null bomb. The null's energy is siphoned away to make a device capable of bringing all magic in an area to a standstill. How far and how long the effect extends depends on the strength of the null being sacrificed the younger and more powerful, the more energy she has to give. And Claire was both very young and very powerful. Making her even more attractive was the fact that the harvesters, as the mages who specialized in the very illegal practice were known, could currently command a premium for their wares. The Vampire Senate, the self-styled guardian of all North American vampires, was at war with the dark mages of the Black Circle, and the price for magical weapons had gone through the roof. The idea that someone had taken Claire to make her into a tool for their stupid war was the main reason I was running myself ragged trying to find her. "The rumor is that she ran off with one of Michael's crew," Kyle was saying. He leaned in to smile in my face, showing enough fang that I knew how much he was enjoying this. He'd tried to chat me up when we first met and hadn't taken my screams of laughter well. He'd been waiting for something to throw in my face, and this was his big chance. "Seems she got knocked up." I smiled back. "That little lie is going to cost you," I promised, slipping a hand into my desk drawer. Claire, the witch with girl power practically stamped on her forehead, running off with a lowlife connected with Michael's stable? Didn't think so. Kyle held up grubby hands with telltale brown stains on them. Leftovers from whoever had been lunch, I guessed. I would have advised him that his love life might improve if he paid someone to scrape the dried blood out from under his nails once in a while, if I hadn't thought he'd eat the manicurist. "No lies, Dory. Not between you and me." He sat back and crossed his legs, looking far too much at ease for my taste. "And you haven't heard the best part yet. Rumor has it that the father's not exactly human, if you know what I mean." His grin turned feral. "Passing me up because you were afraid to bring another half-breed into the world was a waste of time, wasn't it? Looks like you're about to be auntie to a bouncing baby dhampir." I didn't have to glance in the mirror behind his head to know that my expression hadn't changed despite the shock. After five hundred years of practice, anyone can perfect a decent poker face. Even someone as naturally . . . expressive . . . as me. "Actually, I shot you down because homicidal psychos with dog breath don't turn me on," I said pleasantly, pulling my hand out of the drawer and throwing an unstoppered vial in his face. The holy water stuff is a myth, but there are other concoctions that don't sit too well with the smarmy undead, and that was one of them. The dragon's blood wouldn't kill him, but he wouldn't look too good for a few days, either. Of course, since it was Kyle, it was a good bet no one would notice the difference. I tossed his screaming body out the window after he gave up the rest of the few facts he knew, like the name of a bar where I might locate a few of Michael's thugs. He bounced off the sidewalk three stories below and slammed into a parked car, denting the metal with his forehead before crawling off down the street. Too bad it wasn't daylight. If Claire had been harvested, she was almost surely dead by now. But there was a slim chance that Kyle the perpetually smarmy had actually heard something useful. And any lead, however slim, was better than what I had. I paused only long enough to grimace at my reflection, which looked almost as bad as I felt. I needed makeup to conceal the dark circles that were currently almost as black as my eye color, and washing my greasy brown hair for the first time in a week wouldn't hurt either.

No chance of doing the femme fatale thing tonight, but that was okay by me. I get cranky without a full eight hours a night of beauty sleep, and since I'd had maybe that much in the past week, I was feeling surly. I picked up a length of lead pipe and added it to the collection under my coat. There were plenty of other ways to get information. * * * An hour later, I was sitting on a pile of corpses, frowning. The bar where I'd found two of Michael's stable feasting on a half-dead teenager was now a wreck of shattered tables and broken glass. I shifted to avoid the pool of multicolored blood seeping from the bodies under me and stared into the darkness outside. Kyle, it seemed, had not been lying about everything. As one of the boys had helpfully explained after I introduced his head to the bar top a few dozen times, Michael did have Claire. And if Kyle hadn't lied about that, there was the teeniest chance he hadn't lied at all. But I'd still have to see it to believe it. I tossed a handkerchief at the dazed boy leaning on the body of one of his recent attackers. He looked at it blankly. "For your neck," I explained. Vampires didn't have to bite to feed in fact, it was against the rules, since it left hard-to-explain corpses behind if they got carried away. But no one had been paying much attention to the law lately. Usually, that was the way I liked it, but it did leave me with a dilemma now. Normally the mages would be willing to help a witch in a jam, especially a powerful null like Claire. If for no other reason, she was a useful tool they didn't want to lose to the magical black market. The Silver Circle, the so-called white-magic users, would doubtless have sent some of their thugs after Michael in more-normal times, but I doubted they could spare any at the moment. There was a war on, and they were allied with the Senate against an array of forces that were scary enough to make anyone blanch. Not to mention that they hated my guts. If I wanted Claire back, I was going to have to manage it myself. "What" The boy stopped, swallowed, and tried again. "What were those . . . things?" I got up, moved around the bar and reached for the top shelf. What the hell, I was going to torch the place anyway. "You want a drink?" He tried to get to his feet, but was too weak and collapsed again. "No," he said dully. "Just tell me." I threw back a double of Tanqueray and slid the rest of the bottle into one of the deep pockets in my black denim coat. I ignored his question and walked back around the bar. My sense of smell can usually tell a human from anything else from across a room, but the state of the bar was interfering. Dust and smoke hung in the air, and rivers of blood and bile, and whatever fluid several of the odder demon races used as fuel, ran underfoot. I was pretty sure I knew what I was dealing with, but wanted to be certain. I kicked the head of a Varos demon out of the way and crouched in front of the boy, sniffing cautiously. A gout of bloodgreen, so not his had splattered in the direct center of his chest. It stank to high heaven and explained my confusion. I took the unused handkerchief from him and wiped it off. Even after all he'd been through, he didn't look afraid. Being five feet two and dimpled has long been one of my chief assets. "You were here for a while, right?" I asked. It was a stupid question he had six sets of bite marks on his skinny nude body, and none of them looked to be the same size. Vamps have to know one another pretty well to do group feedings, since it's considered an intimate act, so he'd probably been lying around as the free bar snack for a few hours at least. But I wanted to start slow to give him a chance to gather whatever was left of his wits, since there was a chance he'd heard something useful. The two vamps I'd found had told me that there had been a third, who left a half hour or so before I arrived, and that he was one of Michael's lower-level masters. That didn't mean he knew any more than they did, but he could hardly know less. "I don't get it," the boy told me shakily. "You killed them. You killed all of them. Why couldn't I do that?" "Because you aren't dhampir." The voice that answered for me was pitched low, from near the shattered door, but it carried. I knew that voice in a thousand moods and tones, from the chill whipcrack of anger to the warm caress of pride, although the latter had never been directed at me. I tensed but didn't bother to look up. Wonderful. Just what I needed to make my day complete. The boy was staring at the newcomer with relief. Sure, I thought sourly, I do the work, but you save the worshipful looks for the handsome devil with the charming smile. Just don't forget that he could rip your throat out with a single gnash of those pearly white teeth. For all the charisma and expensive tailoring, he's a predator. One even more dangerous than me. I busied myself pouring some of the expensive alcohol in my pocket over the clean portion of the handkerchief and pressed it ruthlessly to the worst of the boy's wounds. He screamed, but neither of us paid any attention. We were used to it. "He'll need medical attention," the voice said as the dark-haired vamp who owned it crossed the room carefully to avoid messing up his two-thousand-dollar suit and Ferragamo loafers. He smelled of good brandy, nicotine and fresh pine. I've never really gotten that last one, but it's always there. Maybe it's some terribly costly cologne, mixed at an Italian perfumer's shop for his exclusive use, or possibly it's just my imagination. A memory of home, maybe. "I'm sure the Senate can arrange something, considering that they went out of their way only last month to proclaim that this sort of thing doesn't happen anymore." I sloshed a bit more alcohol onto the bite

marks at the boy's neck and breast, before moving on to the ugly tear in his thigh. He fainted a few seconds later, which left us with aon my part at leastuncomfortable silence. I broke it first, more interested in getting this over with than winning some kind of power play. "What do you want?" "To talk to you," he said calmly. "I need your help." I did look up at that. In five hundred years, I had never heard those words pass his lips. Hadn't ever thought to, either. "Come again?" "I will be happy to repeat myself, Dorina, but I believe you heard me the first time. We need to talk, and the young man needs attention. We can obtain both at" "I'm not going there." "At my apartment, I was about to say. I am well aware of your sentiments toward the Senate." I refrained from glaring, but doubted that my vaunted poker face was good enough to fool him. It had never been before. Besides, he could hear my heart rate speed up with the extra adrenaline of anger, and probably detect the telltale flush my pale skin couldn't hide. I told myself I didn't care. It had been twelve years since I saw him last, and that had ended with my threatening to kill himfor something like the thousandth timeand storming out. He always got to me. Always. Even when he wasn't trying. I didn't think this was likely to be any different. He reached out to take the unconscious boy in his arms, assuming with that unchanging conceit of his that I'd agree to whatever plan he made. I didn't object, since taking the kid to a local hospital would entail explaining who or what had done this to him, something that would challenge even my ability to stretch the truth. And running to the Senate's local branch was definitely out, considering what had happened the last time I dropped by. Insurance had probably covered the damage, of course, and the place had needed remodeling, but I doubted they saw it that way. I could take the kid back to my house, but although I could deal with his physical injuries, I couldn't erase all this from his memory. But the overgroomed bastard at my side could manage it with little more than a thought. "I didn't know you had a place in New York," I said, and that worried me. There was no reason for him to be here, much less with what was probably an outrageously expensive Central Park-view apartment. Vamps tend to be territorial by nature and usually stick close to home. Of course, the Senate outlawed the old boundaries some time ago to cut down on feuds, so technically he could go wherever he wanted, but as far as I knew, he had no business or personal interests in New York. Except maybe me. "It's a recent acquisition." I narrowed my eyes and followed him out the door. That could mean a lot of things, from him getting a lark to spend some of the millions he'd accumulated through the centuries to dueling another master and acquiring his possessions. I really hoped it was one of those and not some plot to keep up with me. I was well aware that I was dealing with a Senate member, one of the most powerful and dangerous vamps on the planet. I'd been underestimated too many times myself to ever do it to anyone else, no matter how human he looked. Especially not this one. "Well, I hope it has a shower," I said, pouring the rest of the booze over a nearby pile of highly flammable vamp bodies and tossing on a match. "I need a bath." The apartment was posh, Fifth Avenue, and did indeed have a park view. I was relieved to see that it was also furnished in the designer-bland beiges and creams meant to be acceptable to virtually any tasteother than mine. That meant he hadn't been here long enough to impose his personal style, so maybe he hadn't been spying on me. I didn't waste breath sighing in relief, but focused on the only other occupant of the room. I hadn't been dragged off to the Senate's local base of operations, but unless I was mistaken, at least one of its members was sitting on a pale camel-colored sofa waiting for us. The strange vamp flowed to his feet when we came in, his eyes sweeping over the boy before coming to rest on me. I braced for the usual reaction, but didn't get it. That told me either he'd been warned ahead of time, or he was even better than me at the whole poker-face thing. Not surprisingsince they don't have to breathe or have a heartbeat unless they choose, most vamps don't have a lot of tells. Especially not the old ones, and I was guessing from the sense of power this one wore like a cloak that he was a lot older than his thirty-something face appeared. I examined him with interest, since I'd never seen him before. That was unusual, if he was as old as I thought. The newbies come and go, most of them dead before they manage to outlive a normal humanso much for immortalitybut I try to keep up with the major players in the vamp world. There aren't that many first-level masters out there, but this one was not in my extensive mental filing cabinet. I quickly added a new file. He was dressed in an understated outfit my host might have worn if he'd decided it was casual day, one designed to enhance what nature had bestowed with a liberal hand. The off-white sweater was tight enough to show off a nice upper body and the tan suede pants hugged muscular thighs. A spill of rich auburn was trying to escape from a gold clip at his nape. It looked like the kind of hair women on shampoo commercials haveluxurious, overabundant and shiny. It should have looked effeminate on a man, as should the long-lashed blue-gray eyes, but the broad shoulders and strong, arrogant jaw were all male. I frowned at him. Vamps had plenty of advantages already; they didn't need good looks, too. I cataloged his scenta combination of whisky, fine leather and, oddly,

butterscotch for future reference, and returned my attention to his companion. "There is a shower in the bath down the hall, or you may use the one in my room if you like," I was told. "It's through the bedroom at the end of the corridor." My host placed the boy on the sofa, heedless of the expensive upholstery, and whoever the auburn-haired vamp was, he moved to help without a word. He didn't even bother to keep an eye on me as he did so, which I found vaguely insulting. I'd killed his kind for half a millennium and I didn't even rate a blink? He must figure the odds were in his favor. Considering that I was in a room with two first-level masters, he was probably right. I went down a hall that smelled faintly of some generic air freshener. They probably advertised it as "lilac-scented," but it reminded me more of vats of chemicals than wide-open fields and flowers. There is a downside to supersharp senses, as with so much else about me. Of course, there is an upside, too. I cocked an ear, but there was nothing much to hear. A girl was on the phone next door, complaining about some guy to a girlfriend, and someone down a floor was either talking to his cat or having a psychotic episode, but both voices were clearer than the soft noises coming from the living room. The vamps were presumably cleaning the wounds better than I'd been able to do at the bar, and bandaging him up. I knew nobody was planning a snack it would be like offering people used to beluga caviar and Dom Prignon a sack of stale Fritos and a flat coke. Sloppy seconds weren't likely to appeal. I let myself into the big master bedroom and looked around. Opulent, understated, rich. What a surprise. In here the decorator had gone out on a limb and chosen a gray color palette, everything from charcoal on the bedding to ash on the walls. I frowned around with distaste and craved my paints so badly my palms itched. A good half hour of work on the bare stretch over the bed would make all the difference. I've never gotten a security deposit back yet, but then, in my line of work, that was pretty much a given anyway. And I've never lived with flat, gray walls. The bathroom was all blinding white subway tiles in what I guess was supposed to be industrial chic. I took white of course towels out of the closet and got my filthy self into the chrome and glass shower. At least it was big. I leaned my head against the soon-steamy wall and tried not to imagine Claire with a tiny version of myself in her arms. Dhampirs, children of human women and male vampires, were never a good thing. Luckily, we are really rare, since dead sperm don't swim too well. However, there were a few cases where a newly made vamp just out of the grave had been able to sire a child. The kids were usually born barking mad and lived very short, very violent lives. Of course, not all dhampirs were the same. Just like with human children, you never knew how the genes were going to combine. I'd known a few rare ones who took after their mothers and managed to live mostly normal lives. Other than for heightened senses and strength, you might never have known what they were. But those were even rarer than the rare breed itself, and I somehow doubted Claire would get so lucky. I knew her. Whatever the story behind her child's conception, she would love it, nurture it and defend it fiercely, at least until it grew up enough to throw her off a building in a fit of rage it wouldn't even remember. I really, really hoped Kyle had been lying. Otherwise, I was faced with killing my best friend's kid, along with any affection she'd ever had for me, or waiting for her violent death. It would be useless to try to talk to Claire. She'd never understand how much danger she was in, nor be willing to take the necessary steps to ensure her safety. It was that damn respect for life she was always lecturing me about, the same one that made her a strict vegetarian and forced me to have to sneak out to eat barbecue. After all, I could hear her argue, I've known you for years and you've never wanted to kill me. She'd only be hurt and confused if I explained just how wrong she was. Whatever control I may have acquired through long centuries of practice, I'm still a monster. And like the one who sired me, I'll always love death and destruction a little bit more than anything, or anyone, else. I don't know much about my mother, except that she was a young serving girl dumb enough to believe that the local lord's handsome son wasn't just having a good time with her. They'd been together for several months before he was cursed with vampirism, a state he failed to recognize immediately. Unlike the usual way of making a vamp, the curse took a while to complete the transformation. There was no big death scene and no dramatic clawing his way out of his own grave. Instead, he'd shrugged off the Gypsy's mutterings as the ravings of a madwoman and gone about his usual, love-'em-and-leave-'em lifestyle for a fateful few days. Fortunately, I was the only one to whom he'd passed his newly acquired vampiric genes in the meantime. Long story short, nine months later, after he'd gone off to get his undead head together, a bouncing baby me entered the world, only to find that the world wasn't happy to see me. The humans where I grew up were pretty savvy about all things vampire and figured out what I was the first time they saw my baby fangs. Mother was told to drown me in the river and save everyone a lot of trouble. I don't know to this day whether I'm happy or not that she gave me away to a passing Gypsy band instead. She died in a plague some years later, so I never knew her. And my father well, let's just say we have issues. I don't guess that is too surprising considering that

dhampirs and vampires are mortal enemies. Some legends say that God lets dhampirs exist to keep a check on the number of vamps out there. A more scientific explanation is that the predator instinct in vamps is necessary to allow them to feed, but it plays hell with a body that has an adrenal system to overload. But I think at least part of the anger we carry is a natural reaction to being forced into a world where we have zero chance of ever belonging. Vampires hate and fear us, and usually try to kill us on sight. Humans think we're one of them for a while, until one of the rages takes us and our true nature becomes all too obvious. Then we're on the run again, trying to avoid angry mobs of both species while attempting to carve a niche out of their world for ourselves. Most of my kind burn out early, either by over-tasking their systems or far more often by dying in a fight. I know of only one other dhampir as old as me, a batty Indian fakir who lives in the desert of Rajasthan, as far away from human habitation as he can get. It took me more than two months to find him the only time I'd bothered, and he didn't have much useful advice to impart. He manages to keep a lid on things by meditating the centuries away, controlling his true nature by simply denying it any contact with possible prey. That really isn't my style. I prefer the traditional method of letting my second nature out occasionally to hunt, providing that it kills only the undead. Or demons, or the occasional were, or pretty much anything that isn't human. It's messy, but it works, and it even led to my current job. I soaped up my greasy hair and wondered if that was why I'd been tracked down. It seemed unlikely. If the Senate wanted someone dead, they sure as hell didn't need to hire me to do it. They had plenty of their own muscle and an intelligence department second to none. One cut-rate assassin they could do without. There was also the little matter that I had a habit of refusing assignments unless I knew the circumstances involved all of them. I had promised myself to limit my sprees to those who, as the saying goes, deserved killing. I figured that since it was my hand on the ax or the stake or the rifle or whatever it was up to me to be certain I didn't take out someone who had merely irritated a local loan shark. But that nosiness, as the Senate would view it, would have put me off their list of hired talent even if the accident of my birth hadn't already made me persona non grata in a big way. So my skills at the hunt were probably not what was needed here. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what else it could be, though. Occasionally I earned a few bucks checking the supernatural underground for people with problems that the human authorities couldn't manage or even understand. But again, there was nothing I could offer that the Senate couldn't do itself and probably far better. All things considered, I was stumped. Not that it mattered anyway. As soon as I got a few answers out of buffet-boy, I was off hunting Michael. Whatever the Senate wanted, it could damn well come up with some other way to get it. And as for my host, he could drop dead. Again.

Revue de presse
Karen Chance takes her place along with Laurell K. Hamilton, Charlaine Harris, MaryJanice Davidson, and J.D. Robb (SF Revu)
A wonderfully entertaining romp with an engaging heroine (Kelley Armstrong)