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opening extract from

Charmed Life

written by

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published by

HarperCollins

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Chapter One

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Cat Chant admired his elder sister Gwendolen. She was a witch. He admired her and he clung to her. Great changes came about in their lives and left him no one else to cling to.

The first great change came about when their parents took them out for a day trip down the river in a paddle steamer. They set out in great style, Gwendolen and her mother in white dresses with ribbons, Cat and his father in prickly blue serge Sunday suits. It was a hot day. The steamer was crammed with other people in holiday clothes, talking, laughing, eating whelks with thin slices of white bread and butter, while the paddle boat steam organ wheezed out popular tunes

so that no one could hear themselves talk.

In fact the steamer was too crowded and too old. Something went wrong with the steering. The whole laughing, whelk-eating Sunday-dressed crowd was swept away in the current from the weir. They hit one of the posts which were supposed to stop people being swept away, and the paddle steamer, being old, simply broke into pieces. Cat remembered the organ playing and the paddles beating the blue sky. Clouds of steam screamed from broken pipes and drowned the screams from the crowd, as every single person aboard was swept away through the weir.

It was a terrible accident. The papers called it the *Saucy Nancy* Disaster. The ladies in their clinging skirts were quite unable to swim. The men in tight blue serge were very little better off. But Gwendolen was a witch, so she could not drown. And Cat, who flung his arms around Gwendolen when the boat hit the post, survived too. There were very few other survivors.

The whole country was shocked by it. The paddle boat company and the town of Wolvercote between them paid for the funerals. Gwendolen and Cat were given heavy black clothes at public expense, and rode behind the procession of hearses in a carriage pulled by black horses with black plumes on their heads. The other survivors rode with them. Cat looked at them and wondered if they were witches and warlocks, but he never found out. The Mayor of Wolvercote had set up a Fund for the survivors.

Money poured in from all over the country. All the other survivors took their share and went away to start new lives elsewhere. Only Cat and Gwendolen were left and, since nobody could discover any of their relations, they stayed in Wolvercote.

They became celebrities for a time. Everyone was very kind. Everyone said what beautiful little orphans they were. It was true. They were both fair and pale, with blue eyes, and looked good in black. Gwendolen was very pretty, and tall for her age. Cat was small for his age. Gwendolen was very motherly to Cat, and people were touched.

Cat did not mind. It made up a little for the empty, lost way he was feeling. Ladies gave him cake and toys. Town Councillors came and asked how he was getting on; and the Mayor called and patted him on the head. The Mayor explained that the money from the Fund was being put into a Trust for them until they were grown up. Meanwhile, the town would pay for their education and upbringing.

"And where would you little people like to live?" he asked kindly.

Gwendolen at once said that old Mrs Sharp downstairs had offered to take them in. "She's been ever so kind to us," she explained. "We'd love to live with her."

Mrs Sharp had been very kind. She was a witch too – the printed sign in her parlour said *Certified Witch* – and interested in Gwendolen. The Mayor was a little dubious. Like all people who had no talent for witchcraft, he did not

approve of those who had. He asked Cat how he felt about Gwendolen's plan. Cat did not mind. He preferred living in the house he was used to, even if it was downstairs. Since the Mayor felt that the two orphans ought to be made as happy as possible, he agreed. Gwendolen and Cat moved in with Mrs Sharp.

Looking back on it, Cat supposed that it was from this time on that he was certain Gwendolen was a witch. He had not been sure before. When he had asked his parents, they had shaken their heads, sighed, and looked unhappy. Cat had been puzzled, because he remembered the terrible trouble there had been when Gwendolen gave him cramps. He could not see how his parents could blame Gwendolen for it unless she truly was a witch. But all that was changed now. Mrs Sharp made no secret of it.

"You've a real talent for magic, dearie," she said, beaming at Gwendolen, "and I wouldn't be doing my duty by you if I let it go to waste. We must see about a teacher for you right away. You could do worse than go to Mr Nostrum next door for a start. He may be the worst necromancer in town, but he knows how to teach. He'll give you a good grounding, my love."

Mr Nostrum's charges for teaching magic turned out to be £1 an hour for the Elementary Grades, and a guinea an hour for the Advanced Grades beyond. Rather expensive, as Mrs Sharp said. She put on her best hat with black beads and ran round to the Town Hall to see if the Fund would pay for Gwendolen's lessons.

To her annoyance, the Mayor refused. He told Mrs Sharp that witchcraft was not part of an ordinary education. Mrs Sharp came back rattling the beads on her hat with irritation, and carrying a flat cardboard box the Mayor had given her, full of odds and ends the kind ladies had cleared out of Gwendolen's parents' bedroom.

"Blind prejudice!" Mrs Sharp said, dumping the box on the kitchen table. "If a person has a gift, they have a right to have it developed – and so I told him! But don't worry, dearie," she said, seeing that Gwendolen was looking decidedly stormy. "There's a way round everything. Mr Nostrum would teach you for nothing, if we found the right thing to tempt him with. Let's have a look in this box. Your poor Ma and Pa may have left something that might be just the thing."

Accordingly, Mrs Sharp turned the box out on to the table. It was a queer collection of things – letters and lace and souvenirs. Cat did not remember having seen half of them before. There was a marriage certificate, saying that Francis John Chant had married Caroline Mary Chant twelve years ago at St Margaret's Church, Wolvercote, and a withered nosegay his mother must have carried at the wedding. Underneath that, he found some glittery earrings he had never seen his mother wear.

Mrs Sharp's hat rattled as she bent swiftly over these. "Those are diamond earrings!" she said. "Your Ma must have had money! Now, if I took those to

Mr Nostrum – But we'd get more for them if I took them round to Mr Larkins."

Mr Larkins kept the junk shop on the corner of the street – except that it was not always exactly junk. Among the brass fenders and chipped crockery, you could find quite valuable things and also a discreet notice saying *Exotic Supplies* – which meant that Mr Larkins also stocked bats' wings, dried newts and other ingredients of magic. There was no question that Mr Larkins would be very interested in a pair of diamond earrings. Mrs Sharp's eyes pouched up, greedy and beady, as she put out her hand to pick up the earrings.

Gwendolen put out her hand for them at the same moment. She did not say anything. Neither did Mrs Sharp. Both their hands stood still in the air. There was a feeling of fierce invisible struggle. Then Mrs Sharp took her hand away. "Thank you," said Gwendolen coldly, and put the earrings away in the pocket of her black dress.

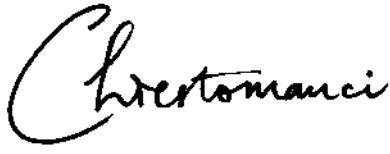
"You see what I mean?" Mrs Sharp said, making the best of it. "You have real talent, dearie!" She went back to sorting the other things in the box. She turned over an old pipe, ribbons, a spray of white heather, menus, concert tickets, and picked up a bundle of old letters. She ran her thumb down the edge of it. "Love letters," she said. "His to her." She put the bundle down without looking at it and picked up another. "Hers to him. No use." Cat, watching Mrs Sharp's broad mauve thumb whirring down a third bundle of letters, thought that being a witch must save a

great deal of time. "Business letters," said Mrs Sharp. Her thumb paused, and went slowly back up the pile again. "Now what have we here?" she said. She untied the pink tape round the bundle and carefully took out three letters. She unfolded them.

"Chrestomanci!" she exclaimed. And, as soon as she said it, she clapped one hand over her mouth and mumbled behind it. Her face was red. Cat could see she was surprised, frightened and greedy, all at the same time. "Now what was *he* doing writing to your Pa?" she said, as soon as she had recovered.

"Let's see," said Gwendolen.

Mrs Sharp spread the three letters out on the kitchen table, and Gwendolen and Cat bent over them. The first thing that struck Cat was the energy of the signature on all three:



The next thing he saw was that two of the letters were written in the same energetic writing as the signature. The first was dated twelve years ago, soon after his parents had been married. It said:

Dear Frank,
Now don't get on your high horse. I only offered because I thought it might help. I

still will help, in any way I can, if you let me know what I can do. I feel you have a claim on me.

Yrs ever,
Chrestomanci

The second letter was shorter:

Dear Chant,
The same to you. Go to blazes.
Chrestomanci

The third letter was dated six years ago, and it was written by someone else. Chrestomanci had only signed it.

Sir,
You were warned six years ago that something like what you relate might come to pass, and you made it quite clear that you wished for no help from this quarter. We are not interested in your troubles. Nor is this a charitable institution.
Chrestomanci

"What did your Pa *say* to him?" Mrs Sharp wondered, curious and awestruck. "Well – what do you think, dearie?"

Gwendolen held her hands spread out above the letters,

rather as if she was warming them at a fire. Both her little fingers twitched. "I don't know. They feel important – specially the first one and the last one – awfully important."

"Who's Chrestomanci?" Cat asked. It was a hard name to say. He said it in pieces, trying to remember the way Mrs Sharp had said it: KREST-OH-MAN-SEE. "Is that the right way?"

"Yes, that's right – and never you mind who he is, my love," said Mrs Sharp. "And important's a weak word for it, dearie. I wish I knew what your Pa had *said*. Something not many people'd dare say, by the sound of it. And look at what he got in return! Three genuine signatures! Mr Nostrum would give his eyes for those, dearie. Oh, you're in luck! He'll teach you for those all right! So would any necromancer in the country."

Gleefully, Mrs Sharp began packing the things away in the box again. "What have we here?" A little red book of matches had fallen out of the bundle of business letters. Mrs Sharp took it up carefully and, quite as carefully, opened it. It was less than half full of flimsy cardboard matches. But three of the matches had been burnt, without being torn out of the book first. The third one along was so very burnt that Cat supposed it must have set light to the other two.

"Hm," said Mrs Sharp. "I think you'd better keep this, dearie." She passed the little red book to Gwendolen, who put it in the pocket of her dress along with the earrings. "And what about you having this, my love?" Mrs Sharp said to Cat, remembering that he had a claim too. She gave

him the spray of white heather. Cat wore it in his buttonhole until it fell to pieces.

Living with Mrs Sharp, Gwendolen seemed to expand. Her hair seemed brighter gold, her eyes deeper blue, and her whole manner was glad and confident. Perhaps Cat contracted a little to make room for her – he did not know. Not that he was unhappy. Mrs Sharp was quite as kind to him as she was to Gwendolen. Town Councillors and their wives called several times a week and patted him on the head in the parlour. They sent him and Gwendolen to the best school in Wolvercote.

Cat was happy there. The only drawback was that Cat was left-handed, and schoolmasters always punished him if they caught him writing with his left hand. But they did that at all the schools Cat had been to, and he was used to it. He had dozens of friends. All the same, at the heart of everything, he felt lost and lonely. So he clung to Gwendolen, because she was the only family he had.

Gwendolen was often rather impatient with him, though usually she was too busy and happy to be downright cross. "Just leave me alone, Cat," she would say. "Or else." Then she would pack exercise books into a music-case and hasten next door for a lesson with Mr Nostrum.

Mr Nostrum was delighted to teach Gwendolen for the letters. Mrs Sharp gave him one every term for a year, starting with the last. "Not all at once, in case he gets greedy," she said. "And we'll give him the best last."

Gwendolen made excellent progress. Such a promising witch was she, indeed, that she skipped the First Grade Magic exam and went straight on to the Second. She took the Third and Fourth Grades together just after Christmas, and, by the following summer, she was starting on Advanced Magic. Mr Nostrum regarded her as his favourite pupil – he told Mrs Sharp so over the wall – and Gwendolen always came back from her lessons with him pleased and golden and glowing. She went to Mr Nostrum two evenings a week, with her magic-case under her arm, just as many people might go to music lessons. In fact, music lessons were what Mrs Sharp put Gwendolen down as having, on the accounts she kept for the Town Council. Since Mr Nostrum never got paid, except by the letters, Cat thought this was rather dishonest of Mrs Sharp.

"I have to put something by for my old age," Mrs Sharp told him crossly. "I don't get much for myself out of keeping you, do I? And I can't trust your sister to remember me when she's grown up and famous. Oh dear me no – I've no illusions about that!"

Cat knew Mrs Sharp was probably right. He was a little sorry for her, for she had certainly been kind, and he knew by now that she was not a very good witch herself. The *Certified Witch* which the notice in Mrs Sharp's parlour window claimed her to be was, in fact, the very lowest qualification. People only came to Mrs Sharp for charms when they could not afford the three Accredited Witches further down the street. Mrs Sharp eked out her earnings

by acting as an agent for Mr Larkins at the junk shop. She got him Exotic Supplies – that is to say, the stranger ingredients needed for spells – from as far away as London. She was very proud of her contacts in London. "Oh yes," she often said to Gwendolen, "I've got the contacts, I have. I know those that can get me a pound of dragon's blood any time I ask, for all it's illegal. While you have me, you'll never be in need."

Perhaps, in spite of having no illusions about Gwendolen, Mrs Sharp was really hoping to become Gwendolen's manager when Gwendolen grew up. Cat suspected she was, anyway. And he was sorry for Mrs Sharp. He was sure that Gwendolen would cast her off like an old coat when she became famous – like Mrs Sharp, Cat had no doubt that Gwendolen would be famous. So he said, "There's me to look after you, though." He did not fancy the idea, but he felt he ought to say it.

Mrs Sharp was warmly grateful. As a reward, she arranged for Cat to have real music lessons. "Then that Mayor will have nothing to complain of," she said. She believed in killing two birds with one stone.

Cat started to learn the violin. He thought he was making good progress. He practised diligently. He never could understand why the new people living upstairs always banged on the floor when he started to play. Mrs Sharp, being tone-deaf herself, nodded and smiled when he played, and encouraged him greatly.

He was practising away one evening, when Gwendolen

stormed in and shrieked a spell in his face. Cat found, to his dismay, that he was holding a large striped cat by the tail. He had its head tucked under his chin, and he was sawing at its back with the violin bow. He dropped it hurriedly. Even so, it bit him under the chin and scratched him painfully.

"What did you do that for?" he said. The cat stood in an arch, glaring at him.

"Because that's just what it sounded like!" said Gwendolen. "I couldn't stand it a moment longer. Here, pussy, pussy!" The cat did not like Gwendolen either. It scratched the hand she held out to it. Gwendolen smacked it. It ran away, with Cat in hot pursuit, shouting, "Stop it! That's my fiddle! Stop it!" But the cat escaped, and that was the end of the violin lessons.

Mrs Sharp was very impressed with this display of talent from Gwendolen. She climbed on a chair in the yard and told Mr Nostrum about it over the wall. From there, the story spread to every witch and necromancer in the neighbourhood.

That neighbourhood was full of witches. People in the same trade like to cluster together. If Cat came out of Mrs Sharp's front door and turned right down Coven Street, he passed, besides the three *Accredited Witches*, two *Necromancy Offered*, a *Soothsayer*, a *Diviner*, and a *Willing Warlock*. If he turned left, he passed MR HENRY NOSTRUM A.R.C.M. *Tuition in Necromancy*, a *Fortune-teller*, a *Sorcery For All Occasions*, a *Clairvoyant*, and lastly Mr Larkins' shop. The air in the street, and for several streets around,

was heavy with the scent of magic being done.

All these people took a great and friendly interest in Gwendolen. The story of the cat impressed them enormously. They made a great pet of the creature – naturally, it was called Fiddle. Though it remained bad-tempered, captious and unfriendly, it never went short of food. They made an even greater pet of Gwendolen. Mr Larkins gave her presents. The Willing Warlock, who was a muscular young man always in need of a shave, popped out of his house whenever he saw Gwendolen passing and presented her with a bullseye. The various witches were always looking out simple spells for her.

Gwendolen was very scornful of these spells. "Do they think I'm a baby or something? I'm *miles* beyond this stuff!" she would say, casting the latest spell aside.

Mrs Sharp, who was glad of any aid to witchcraft, usually gathered the spell up carefully and hid it. But once or twice, Cat found the odd spell lying about. Then he could not resist trying it. He would have liked to have had just a little of Gwendolen's talent. He always hoped that he was a late-developer and that, some day, a spell would work for him. But they never did – not even the one for turning brass buttons into gold, which Cat particularly fancied.

The various fortune-tellers gave Gwendolen presents too. She got an old crystal ball from the Diviner and a pack of cards from the Soothsayer. The Fortune-teller told her fortune for her. Gwendolen came in golden and exultant from that.

"I'm going to be famous! He said I could rule the world if I go the right way about it!" she told Cat.

Though Cat had no doubt that Gwendolen would be famous, he could not see how she could rule the world, and he said so. "You'd only rule one country, even if you married the King," he objected. "And the Prince of Wales got married last year."

"There are more ways of ruling than that, stupid!" Gwendolen retorted. "Mr Nostrum has lots of ideas for me, for a start. Mind you, there are some snags. There's a change for the worse that I have to surmount, and a dominant Dark Stranger. But when he told me I'd rule the world my fingers all twitched, so I *know* it's true!" There seemed no limit to Gwendolen's glowing confidence.

The next day, Miss Larkins the Clairvoyant called Cat into her house and offered to tell his fortune too.