

CAT'S CALL

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

The Chronicles of Charlie Waterman
Book 1

Natasha Duncan-Drake

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Natasha Duncan-Drake

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For my Papa, who had one hell of a year in 2017, and who finally left us in 2022, and my Mama, who was there for him every step of the way through his illness. I love you both.

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1. AN INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNING

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER'S DAY. The sun was shining, there was the slightest breeze to keep the air moving and the park was calling Charlie's name. He hadn't said he'd definitely be there, but several of his friends had planned to meet up and kick a ball around.

He'd been helping his mum with some things in the morning, like the dutiful son he was, but now he planned to kick back and relax. It was his last summer before university. It was time to have fun. Glancing both ways up the road and seeing a gap in the traffic, he jogged across. The quickest route to the park was behind the Black Bull pub and down Baker's Lane, but, as he went to turn left, something caught his eye.

The old magic shop that had been there for years, but always seemed to be closed, had a sign in the window that shockingly read 'open' for once. There were many silly rumours about the shop: it was owned by a famous magician who only sold to invited guests; it was haunted by the ghost of a spurned magician's assistant which was why it could never be sold or let people in; it was a front for the local mafia. They got more ridiculous from there.

On impulse Charlie turned and headed for the door. He had almost worked there once, but circumstances had been against him. Of course, he, like everyone under twenty in the area, had always wanted to see inside.

The windows were full of brightly coloured scarves that gave an air of gaiety, but the paint was peeling on the window frame, letting down the

whole image. He peered in. It was dim beyond the scarves, and he couldn't see anything. All a bit ominous. He hesitated and then laughed at how absurd he was being. He didn't believe in ghosts or eccentric magicians, and he reached for the door handle.

After the brightness of outside, the interior of the shop was very dark. The first thing he had to do was stop to let his eyes adjust. The door shut behind him with a click and a final thunk. It made his heart beat a little bit faster for no reason he was willing to admit. Only after blinking a couple of times could he finally make out what was around him.

"You are not what I was expecting," a voice said from the other end of the shop.

Charlie could relate. The shop was nothing like he had thought. There were no tricks, just shelves and shelves of things that some people might think were actually magic. Charlie didn't believe in magic.

"You are too old," the voice continued.

Peering through the gloom and slight haze of incense that was tickling his nose, he finally made out an older woman standing at the other end of the shop behind a counter.

"Sorry," he said, "I thought you were open."

He was sure the sign had said 'open', but now he was second guessing himself. The urge to flee was high. For some reason the woman made him nervous. It probably had something to do with the penetrating stare she had aimed right at him.

"I've always meant to come in," he said, and he knew he was babbling, it was a bad habit. "I almost worked here once, when I was sixteen. Had a letter, but my bus broke down and I missed my interview. Um ... I'll be going then, sorry to have disturbed you."

The woman narrowed her eyes and made an odd humming sound. It was unsettling.

"No matter," she said just as he was about to turn away, "come in, look around, explore where your heart leads you."

The whole situation was getting weirder by the second. Clearly the woman had mysterious and eccentric down to a tee. Of course, now she had invited him in, Charlie couldn't just run away anymore. It would be rude.

He smiled awkwardly and escaped behind one of the shelving racks.

"How do you manage to get yourself into these situations, Waterman?" he muttered to himself.

The shelves were full of crystals and statues and all sorts of paraphernalia that held no interest for him whatsoever. Still, he looked around and did his best to pretend to browse. He didn't want to offend anyone, even if they were peculiar and burned really strange smelling incense. Come to think of it, especially then, because he had seen enough horror movies to know who not to annoy.

His footsteps sounded far too loud in the almost silent shop, and the smell of the place was making him want to sneeze, but he kept it up for a good few minutes. How long was long enough for propriety's sake? He had no idea. Wishing that there were rules to these things, he kept glancing at the door.

When he put his head round one of the shelves to see where the woman was, she was looking right at him. His heart skipped a beat. With yet another awkward smile he made his way to another set of shelves and prayed for deliverance.

He was slowly making his way back towards the door, past a floor to ceiling shelving unit, when something glinted at him. It made him stop because he was pretty sure there wasn't enough light in that part of the shop to make anything glint. As he stared at the dark shelf, whatever it was did it again. This time he could tell it was green.

He stepped towards the shelf before he even thought about it. Only as he reached one hand into the darkness did he pause. It was probably just a fire detector or an incense burner with a flashy light. He almost pulled his hand back, but then the flash came again, twice.

As the saying went, curiosity killed the cat, and Charlie was definitely a curious sort. Now he needed to know what it was. He reached into the shelf the rest of the way, right to the back where he thought the tiny light had come from, and his hand closed around something. He pulled it out before he could change his mind.

It fitted neatly into his closed fist, so he didn't think it was anyone's lost phone or something like that. When he uncurled his fingers a stab of disappointment ran through him. He had to have grabbed the wrong thing. In his palm was a small cat figurine, sitting up smartly like it was on duty. It didn't even look like it was painted, just made of brown clay.

Glancing back at the shelf he waited for the glint of light again.

A tickling in the palm of his hand made him look back down instead.

Shock lanced through his chest like cold fire, freezing him in place even as his heart beat madly. He swallowed hard.

The cat's eyes, which had been closed, contented slits in the clay, were open. The little creature's head was tilted up, looking at him, and its tail was gently twitching.

The cat gazed at him. He gazed back. It was all he could do.

Its eyes were hypnotic, even as a voice at the back of his brain screamed that this could not be real and something had to have happened to him. Those green orbs seemed to bore into his soul, freezing him solid.

Finally, the cat blinked, but whatever held him did not release. He was left to watch as the tiny creature stood up and walked across his palm until its front paws were touching his wrist. A hysterical laugh was caught in his throat, because he could feel minuscule claws pricking at his skin.

His heart felt like it was trying to beat out of his chest. He had to gasp for tiny breaths that really weren't helping. Still he could not move.

Had he been drugged? Was he having a seizure? Were some of the crazy rumours about the shop true? Were they modern day slavers trading in teenagers? Was that why the woman thought he was too old?

His mind hummed with questions as he point-blank refused to believe that what he was seeing was real.

When the little cat dug its claws into the delicate flesh of his inner wrist the pain definitely felt real. All he could manage was a quiet whimper as his body refused to obey any of the instincts firing through it. That was nothing, however, to the agony that shot up his arm as the figurine began to dig its paws under the upper level of skin. Blood trickled down over his wrist and it was finally enough to break his paralysis.

He threw his arm sideways, hitting one of the shelves behind him in his wild flailing. But he could not stop the pain. It was as if the little cat was glued to his arm. He tried to brush it off with his other hand, but that just hurt more, and he finally cried out.

"Help!"

He didn't know what was happening, but he knew he needed assistance.

Stumbling backwards, he grabbed his arm with his other hand. His own flesh was betraying him.

The woman came round the end of the row and he held out his wrist desperately, but she did nothing. He wanted to yell at her, demand she do something, but heat ran through his veins and took any breath he had away. His legs went weak, and the room spun as he shuddered from head to foot.

"Help," was the best he could do in a tiny whisper as he fell to his knees.

His vision faded out, and then in, and then out again, even as he began to pitch forward. He never even knew when he hit the floor.

2. ESCAPE

"HE IS TOO OLD."
Charlie swam back to consciousness just in time to hear those words from a deep, unfamiliar male voice. His first thought was: 'Oh my god, they're trying to sell me.'

"The door opened for him."

That was the woman. He almost stopped panicking at the strangeness of her words...

"He cannot be trained."

But he stared panicking again when the man said that. He had a very vivid imagination and far too many possible scenarios popped into his head at the same time.

"The Cat Spirit chose him."

That brought to mind his little acid trip. He was completely confused. The argument going on made no sense.

Charlie needed to figure out what mess he was in before something else bad happened. He did not move, just looked around. The room was dimly lit, even more so than the shop had been, but, to his relief it was filled with the same kind of things, only in boxes and on random shelves. He guessed he was in the shop's storeroom.

He was lying on an old sofa that smelt of dust and had definitely seen better days. Thankfully he was not restrained in anyway.

"He is past the threshold," the unknown man insisted, "his mind will not accept the new reality. He should have been brought here two years ago."

Charlie decided that maybe he was still suffering from the aftereffects of whatever had caused the earlier incident, because the conversation made even less sense the longer it went on. He sat up slowly, just in case, swinging his legs down from where they were over one arm of the sofa. Nothing span and he felt perfectly lucid. Maybe the people that ran the shop were just insane.

He looked down at his wrist then, to check to see if anything could explain what he had seen before. He only just stopped himself swearing when his eyes alighted on a cat tattooed on his arm. That had definitely not been there when he passed out.

The ideas in his brain went from slavers to cult.

He had stumbled into a crazy cat cult, and they'd somehow drugged him or hypnotised him before trying to recruit him.

It was a beautiful cat at least. Very stylised and flowing. It was all in black ink, but at least it was a nice design.

He shook his head as he realised what he was thinking. Whatever they had done to him, it still had to be having some sort of effect, he needed to be getting away, not thinking his non-consensual tattoo was pretty.

Standing up went surprisingly well. His legs felt perfectly strong, and the room did not lurch in any way at all. It was a good start.

Moving as quietly as he knew how, he began to look around.

The place was dusty. Most of the stock had layers of it and even cobwebs. It didn't look as if anyone had moved anything in a long while. When a shop was never open, he supposed they didn't need their excess stock very often.

Unfortunately, there was no convenient back door. In fact, all he found was the one source of light in the room, a high window that ran along the back wall. Glancing at the slightly open door he considered just making a run for it.

"Chaos has its ways, he is here now."

"It will not work."

The man's voice really was deep and Charlie nixed his initial idea. If the owner of the voice was as big as he sounded there was no guarantee Charlie could get past him once out of the storeroom. The window was his only chance.

Most of it was just sealed glass, but the pane in the middle was one of those old-fashioned windows that would swing up all the way. It wasn't huge, but Charlie was pretty sure he could fit through.

He had never moved more silently in his entire life as he crept towards the light. The first problem that reared its ugly head was the fact the window was too high. He was reasonably tall, but not a giant and jumping up and down would only get him caught.

Luckily for him, there was a plain wooden chair a metre or so to the right. It was covered in dust, but it didn't appear to have any worm holes or broken parts. Making very sure of every single step, he walked over to it. That was when he made his first mistake.

As he bent down just to make sure he was right about the state of the chair he breathed in. Dust launched straight up his nose. It was just like the time his dad had accidentally thrown white pepper at him when making scrambled eggs and he felt the beginnings of the most almighty sneeze. He grabbed at his nose desperately, squeezing it closed.

The most incredible pain lanced into his head as he thwarted nature. It made his eyes water as his nose made it very plain it was not in the least bit happy about not being able to expel the invading contaminant. For a good few seconds, he did not dare move.

Eventually, of course, he had to and was relieved to find the urge to sneeze completely gone. This time he was very careful about how he breathed as he bent over. With shaking hands, he took hold of each side of the chair and lifted it directly upwards. He refused to give in to his fear and moved as slowly back to the window as he had done coming over from it.

The chair made the tiniest sound as he put it back down. He froze.

"You cannot dispute this."

His captors continued speaking as if they had heard nothing, but he still waited a few seconds more. When no one came storming through the door, he looked up. First, he placed his left foot on the chair and, keeping his eyes firmly on the ledge, he pushed off with his right. He was honestly amazed when this made virtually no sound at all. Still, he paused, looking out of the window and waited.

Once again there was no sign he had been discovered.

The next problem was that, although the window opened easily once he released the catch, there was no way to prop it open. There had been once, but all that was left of the bar was a rusted eyelet.

Charlie didn't dare jump, it would have made too much noise.

He glanced down at the chair. He had placed the back of it against the wall, but it wasn't completely flat. It had two horizontal slats making up a back rest and he was pretty sure he could get his foot onto the bottom one. The whole thing would be precarious, but it would give him the extra boost he needed. There really wasn't any other option.

Holding the window with one hand, he braced himself on the window ledge with the other and put the tip of his toe on the back slat of the chair. His heart felt like it was trying to beat out of his chest again as his mind ran over every bad scenario possible.

Charlie took two shallow breaths and boosted himself upwards.

Honestly, he was shocked when it worked. He managed to get the top half of his body through the window so that he was looking at the alley beside the magic shop. He was home free.

Then there was a crash. His heart fell as he realised he'd knocked over the chair.

"What was that?" he heard.

Desperately he made one last push, wiggling through the window as best and as fast as he could. There was nothing graceful or controlled about it and he fell out the other side.

* * *

Charlie scrambled to his feet. He needed to run and he didn't care where. He hit the street at full pelt and dashed across the road. The angry sound of a car horn followed him. He didn't even consider where he was going as he put distance between himself and the shop.

Only when he reached the churchyard, breathing hard, did he stop. His chest ached from the exertion. Holding on to the wall, he bent over, trying to catch his breath with long gasps. He hadn't run that fast in a long time. Fear had put speed into his legs, but adrenaline didn't last forever. The stitch in his side helpfully illustrated that point very graphically.

Straightening up, he finally took stock of where he was. The church lurched in his vision, splitting into two, one of which flashed bright colours at him, before the two came back together again.

Charlie blinked hard.

Unfortunately, the church building did the same thing again. His stomach twisted as his inner ear objected to what he was seeing and threatened what little equilibrium he had. Rubbing his eyes, he turned away from the building and blinked again, this time at the back of the arcade of boutiques he had run through to get to his current position. Nothing moved, which was a blessing.

His brain still had to be addled from whatever they had used to knock him out.

He scanned the area, just in case he had been pursued, but there was no one except a very posh-looking woman coming out of one of the shops. She didn't even spare him a glance. He tried to think, but even as he did, one of the old houses in the square around the church lurched, just like the ancient building had. It was like watching one of those old 3D films without the glasses on, only much, much more disorientating.

It made Charlie's head spin and bile rise in the back of his throat.

He grabbed at the churchyard wall again.

He needed to get somewhere safe before he passed out or something equally as disastrous happened. The idea of the police station came first, but it was the other end of town. Every time something around him did the lurching thing it drained energy directly out of him. Even as he glanced back at the church, just to see, he felt his legs go weak. Making it to the police station without collapsing in a heap didn't seem possible.

Calling someone filtered into his head and he fumbled in his pocket, refusing to look up at all. In his haste his phone nearly slipped through his fingers onto the nearest gravestone. Catching it at the last second sent a whole new burst of adrenaline flying through his system, which at least woke up his brain a bit. He pushed the button on the side, but the screen didn't come to life.

The second time he held the button down, but he had a nasty suspicion. When still nothing happened after several seconds, he had to admit the

battery was flat. He'd charged it the night before, just like every night, but it was completely dead.

He glanced at the shops. Maybe someone in there could help him, but before he could move, he caught the lurching house out of the corner of his eye and he swayed. They would think he was drunk or high or something worse and a hundred and one nightmare scenarios jumped into his head.

No, he would go home.

He was halfway there already. In his panic he had headed towards the safest place he knew. It had been a good instinct. When he was home, he could figure out what to do next.

Keeping his eyes firmly on the pavement in front of him, trying not to look at anything else at all, he began to walk. The way was familiar, he'd walked it a thousand times before, and his feet took him where he needed to go.

Charlie had never before considered how instinctive it was to look up, but he quickly found out. Every time he forgot and lifted his eyes off the pavement, something, somewhere lurched at him. Buildings, things, even some people, and every time it sucked the life out of him.

By the time he made it home he wasn't sure what was real anymore. He rang the bell, but there was no answer. In the back of his brain a little voice informed him that it was his mum's afternoon for volunteering at the hospice shop, but it took a while before his forebrain accepted the information.

When it finally did, he fished out his keys. First of all, it took him four tries to select the right key from the bunch. Then the key missed the lock three times before it finally slid home. Charlie all but fell through the door.

He didn't care about anything else anymore, he needed to sleep. Slamming the door carelessly, he staggered to the stairs and dragged himself up them. Nothing but getting to his bed registered in his head.

Habit made him close his bedroom door after he lurched through it, at which point he kicked off his jeans and fell onto the bed face first. He crawled up it slowly, absently thanking whoever had invented memory foam, and his sister Becky for getting married in March and allowing him to inherit the bed.

Nothing had ever felt so glorious as he lay there and let sleep take him. It was so good he almost purred.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha is a British author living in the southeast of England with her husband and two cats. She has been publishing genre fiction with Wittegen Press since 2011. Her work includes everything from horror to young adult fantasy and she has never met a genre she didn't like. A prolific producer of short stories and novels alike, Natasha currently has over a plethora of titles in her back catalogue with further releases always imminent.

Natasha was inspired to start writing way back as a pre-teen after she read *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien. She is a huge fan of science fiction, fantasy, and horror in all their media forms, and is a big advocate of fanfiction as a great tool for writers to polish their skills in a welcoming and supportive community.

Find her online at WittegenPress.com

BSky: [@tashaddrake](https://twitter.com/tashaddrake) | Tasha's Thinkings Blog

[Tales With Tasha](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8) (YouTube)

All my links in one place: <https://linktr.ee/NatashaDuncanDrake>

And if you enjoy your fiction on the naughtier side, check out Natasha's new alter ego, **Virginia Waytes** her Sexy Stories Podcast and the eBooks that go with it. The Manor is an exclusive adult only club in the heart of the English countryside where supernatural beings live, work and play.

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