

# The Shadow Thieves (Cronus Chronicles #1)

## Chapter One

### *Charlotte*

Pay attention. Watch carefully, now. Look at the sidewalk, there. See that girl – the one with the bright red hair, overstuffed backpack, and aura of grumpiness? That's Charlotte Mielswetzki. (Say it with me: Meals-wet-ski. Got it? If not, say it again: Meals. Wet. Ski. There. You thought your name was bad?) And something extraordinary is about to happen to her.



No, the extraordinary event will not be related to that man watching her behind the oak tree...that oddly pale, strangely thin, freakishly tall, yellow-eyed, bald-headed man in the tuxedo. (And while we're at it, why on Earth would anyone be wearing a tuxedo at four o'clock on an unseasonably warm October afternoon? And if you are going to wear such an outfit at such a time on such a day, surely it is not because you are going to hide behind oak trees to spy on small, pale, freckled thirteen-year-old redheaded girls with bulging backpacks, is it? Because that would be really strange.) But regardless, it's not about him, not yet. He will come later. Forget him. Focus on Charlotte. Charlotte is walking home from school, and she is in a very bad mood.

Of course, this has all already happened, there is nothing we can do about any of it now, alas – so if we're to be accurate, we should say: Charlotte was walking home from school in a very bad mood while the four-o'clock sun cast long shadows over the sidewalk, entirely unaware of the white-skinned, yellow-eyed man in the tuxedo watching her from behind the oak tree.

And no, the bad mood was not, in itself, extraordinary. At the time you could often find Charlotte with a black cloud hanging over her head – though a purely metaphorical one – what with the new school year and the piles of homework and the creepy new English teacher and the tremendously banal classmates, and today her mood was even worse than usual, given that the cast list for the school play had been posted and her name was distinctly not on it and she hadn't been planning on trying out for the stupid thing because she knew she wouldn't get cast and then she did try out, and see? So if Charlotte seemed extremely grumpy – if she was, in fact, muttering to herself darkly – you would have to forgive her. As for the dark mutterings, they would have been hard to decipher if you had been, say, hiding behind a tree spying on her, but we know they went something like this:

"Once upon a time there was a girl named Charlotte who suffered from a terrible curse. She didn't know how or why she'd been cursed, but she did know that nothing good ever, ever, ever happened to her."

You get the point. So anyway, there she was, walking along in an ordinary way, muttering to herself about curses, with her bursting backpack and her metaphorical black cloud and her ordinary bad mood – when something extraordinary happened.

A kitten appeared in front of her.

Not – poof! – not like that. Nothing magical at all. Quite ordinary, in fact. A normal chain of events, just what you would expect with a sudden appearance of a kitten. There was this high-pitched squeaking from the bushes and then this flurry of motion, and just as Charlotte was processing these events, suddenly there – directly in her path, right in her shadow, in fact – stood a blue-eyed gray and white kitten.

Charlotte stopped. The kitten stared at Charlotte. Charlotte stared at the kitten. The kitten cocked its head.

"Hi!" said Charlotte, her green eyes softening.

"Meow," said the kitten.

And Charlotte, being of sound mind, reached down and petted the kitten. She scratched it under its chin, then behind the ears for good measure, and then she started on her way home.

"Bye, kitty," called Charlotte.

"Meow!" said the kitten. And the next thing Charlotte knew, the kitten was standing in front of her again, blocking her path and meowing rather insistently.

"Now, kitty," said Charlotte, "I have to go home. Do you have any idea how much homework I have? You should go home too."

The kitten looked at her blankly. Charlotte began to walk on, but once again the kitten ran up and stood in front of her. Charlotte tilted her head and considered. The kitten was awfully skinny.

"Do you have a home?" asked Charlotte uncertainly.

"Meow," said the kitten.

That seemed like a no. Charlotte regarded the kitten frankly. The kitten, in turn, regarded her. There seemed to be only one thing to do.

"Would you like to come home with me?" asked Charlotte.

"Meow," said the kitten.

So that was that. Charlotte picked up the blue-eyed gray and white kitten, tucked it under her thin, pale, freckly arm, and headed home, suddenly feeling that the world was perhaps not so tiresome, if you only looked hard enough.

Now, stray kittens are not, in themselves, an extra-ordinary phenomenon. And given events that were to follow, finding one would seem positively mundane. But if you were Charlotte, and you had been feeling that life was some cosmic joke that had no punch line, and in the space of a moment you had gone from being Charlotte-without-a-kitten to being Charlotte-with-a-kitten, you too would have found it nothing short of remarkable. (Even if you did not notice that as soon as you picked up the kitten,

the man in the inappropriate tuxedo shook his head slowly and skulked off into the shadows.)

When Charlotte arrived home, she found her parents seated in the kitchen, talking. This was not unusual; Charlotte's father taught at the high school and was often home when she got there, and her mother worked from an office on the second floor of the Mielswetzski house for half of the week. Charlotte's mother was a child psychologist who wrote books on adolescence and was very concerned with Charlotte's well-being. This was not always as advantageous as it sounds.

For instance, just last week Charlotte had come home from school to find her mother perched all too casually in the kitchen, pretending she was not, in fact, waiting for Charlotte. But she totally was. Charlotte knew the signs; her mother was not casual about anything.

That day the topic of conversation was, not surprisingly, Charlotte and her attitude. Said topic was a particular favorite of Charlotte's mom's; no one in the history of the world ever liked to talk about anything as much as Charlotte's mom liked to talk about Charlotte's attitude. Charlotte thought her mother should be given some kind of plaque or something, or maybe there should be a statue – except the statue would probably want to talk about Charlotte's attitude too.

So anyway, when Charlotte got home from school that day, her mother just happened to be sitting in the kitchen reading, and the kitchen was not really that comfortable a place to be reading, but that's beside the point. And when her mother offered to make her a snack, Charlotte thought for a moment about pretending she had somewhere else to be, but she knew the best thing to do would be to let her make the snack and get this over with.

"So, Char...," her mother said casually, unscrewing the peanut butter lid. "I hear the school play auditions are coming up..."

How did she possibly hear that? Charlotte wondered. One thing about her mother is she has way too many friends.

"Are you thinking of auditioning?" she asked, opening the box of crackers.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. Hi, Mom, have we met?

"Because I thought maybe you should," she said, spreading the peanut butter on the crackers. "You used to love acting when you were little." She smiled and brought Charlotte the plate.

Charlotte shrugged. "Aw, Mom, I'd never get in."

"Char, honey, how would you know unless you tried?" she said, sitting down opposite her daughter. "You should try!"

"I just know, Mom," she grumbled, tossing her long hair. It was true. In elementary school Charlotte had loved drama class, had loved being in the school plays, and had even gone to a summer day camp where they learned some of the songs from Annie. And then she got to middle school and auditioned for the play and the choir and

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tried out for the softball and gymnastics teams and didn't get in any of them. That was enough of that. Charlotte could see very quickly where the bread was buttered; she might be a loser, but she was no idiot. The world gave you enough disappointment without actually going out and asking for it.

"I know you're upset about not getting in before," her mom continued, "but you were a sixth grader then, and they rarely cast sixth graders. You're in eighth grade now. You should try. What's the harm in trying?"

Charlotte shrugged.

"Honey" – Mrs. Mielswetzski leaned in and grabbed Charlotte's hands – "if only you could see what I see! You're so bright and talented. You can do whatever you set your mind on doing. The whole world is your oyster."

Charlotte sighed inwardly. She knew her mother was serious when she started referring to shellfish. What did that mean, anyway? What's so great about the world being your oyster? Does that mean it's really hard to open, and when you do, you have something slimy and gross on the inside?

"Char, I just wish, sometimes...that you'd try a little harder. In everything. I feel like you're always running away from things. I wish you'd live your life, really go out there and live it. All your teachers say you have so much potential. If you'd just...use it."

Charlotte had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes. Teachers loved to say people had potential; that's what teachers did to keep themselves from getting canned. What were they supposed to say – I'm sorry, your kid has no promise whatsoever? She's utterly mediocre in every way?

"It would be fun to be in a play, wouldn't it?" Mrs. Mielswetzski continued. "You could meet some new people."

Charlotte grimaced. Meeting new people had been another one of her mother's favorite conversation topics ever since Charlotte's best friend, Caitlin, moved to Russia over the summer and left Charlotte and their friend Maddy behind. That's right, Russia. Caitlin's parents were English-as-a-second-language teachers, and they decided to take two-year jobs teaching English to Russian orphans, or some absurd thing like that. Who does that? And even if you do do that, can't you teach English to orphans in a place that has e-mail?

Well anyway, "meeting new people" was often a subset of "trying harder" and "getting involved" and "having a better attitude," and frankly Charlotte was tired of it all. She'd been hearing about this so much that she would do anything to stop it. Anything.

"Okay, Mom."

"What?" her mother started.

"Okay...I'll audition."

Mrs. Mielswetzski clasped her hands together. "Oh, Charlotte, that's wonderful! You'll have so much fun!"

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She was actually beaming. Charlotte hadn't seen her look that happy in months. And something about the particular light emanating from her mother's face warmed Charlotte, and she felt suddenly different about the world. Yes, she would have fun! Yes, she could try! For the world was a place where you put yourself out there, where you tried things, and even if your best friend since you were four had just moved to the former Soviet Union, there were all kinds of people whose parents didn't want to teach orphans, and maybe they were worth meeting.

That mood lasted until Charlotte saw the cast list, on which her name was very distinctly absent and the names of some of her more banal classmates were very distinctly present, and Charlotte realized that she had been duped, and she was never ever going to put herself out there again, never going to "try harder," never going to "improve her attitude," and certainly never ever going to "meet new people." Why would she want to meet new people when the people she already knew were asking her to humiliate herself? So she had planned to tell her mother when she got home from school on this day – that, and that this was all her mother's fault and she was never listening to her ever, ever again.

But of course she forgot all of that as soon as she picked up the kitten, and when she saw her parents in the kitchen, instead of wanting to yell or flee, she was absolutely delighted – for she could tell them about the world and all its extraordinary kitten-esque things. She did not know that they had been waiting for her for quite some time because they, too, had news – news that they promptly forgot when they saw the gray and white creature in their daughter's arms.

"Oh!" said her mother.

"Oh!" said her father.

"She followed me home," said Charlotte.

"Well, she probably belongs to someone," said her mother.

"Almost certainly," said her father.

"Look at her fur! It's all dirty," said Charlotte.

"We'll put up signs," said her mother.

"And put a classified in the paper," said her father.

"Look how skinny she is," said Charlotte.

"She might have worms," said her mother.

"She might have rabies," said her father.

"Well, we should take her to the vet," said Charlotte.

"Yes, we should!" said her mother.

"Right away," said her father.

While Mr. Mielswetzski called the vet and then checked the newspaper classifieds, and Mrs. Mielswetzski called the lost and found at the Humane Society --

for these are steps everyone should take when finding a kitten, because someone may be missing it very much – Charlotte opened a can of tuna for her new friend.

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"What's your name?" asked Charlotte.

"Meow," said the kitten.

"Are you a girl kitten or a boy kitten?" asked Charlotte.

"Meow," said the kitten.

"Do you want to go to the vet?"

"Meow," said the kitten.

The vet could see them right away, so the Mielswetzskis piled into the car. It was not an hour later that Charlotte found that her kitten was a girl (Charlotte had thought so), did not have rabies (good), did have worms (nothing some pills wouldn't take care of), was certainly underfed (poor kitty), and was likely a stray. They should put up signs and put an ad in the newspaper, but if no one claimed the kitten for one month, she would be an official member of the family.

Charlotte was not worried. They could put up all the signs and take out all the ads they wanted. The kitten had chosen her – it was fate, and Charlotte knew it. Charlotte might not be good for choirs or plays or school or sports or good attitudes or new people, but she knew that she was good for kittens. And kittens were most certainly good for Charlotte.

Mr. and Mrs. Mielswetzski were good parents and good people, and while perhaps they would not have thought to go out and get themselves a cat – the time was never quite right, maybe next year, maybe for Christmas, it's important not to rush into anything – if one were to fall into their laps, they would certainly let it stay there.

"She is awfully cute," said Charlotte's father on the way home from the vet.

"We better not get too attached," said her mother.

"But it would sure be nice," said her father.

"Well, there's no doubt about that," said her mother.

"We should pick up some supplies," said her father.

"Oh, yes," said her mother. "The cat will need supplies."

And pretty soon the Mielswetzskis had not only a cat, but two ceramic cat dishes, a bag of premium kitten food, one scratching post, some clumping litter, a litter box with a hood, assorted balls and accoutrements, three toy mice, two boxes of catnip, and one sorely needed soft-bristled brush.

"What are you going to call her?" asked her father, putting the bags in the car.

"At least until she's claimed," said her mother, getting into the front seat.

"Bartholomew," said Charlotte.

It just came out of her mouth – "Bartholomew" – but maybe that, too, was fate. Because Bartholomew is an excellent name for a cat, even if the cat is a girl cat and Bartholomew is a boy's name. Because cats need names, even if you are going to pretend the cat is temporary (when you know it is not). Because you can shorten it to Mew, which is really the most fabulous nickname for a cat ever. And because Bartholomew was currently curled up fast asleep on Charlotte's lap.

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"Once upon a time there was a cat with no home," Charlotte whispered to Mew. "And there was a girl with a home but no cat. But then the cat found the girl, and the girl took the cat to her home, and then they moved to Prague together and opened a coffee shop and lived happily ever after."

But Bartholomew was not the only surprise in store for Charlotte that day. At dinner that night – take-out Chinese food from the restaurant next to the pet store – Mrs. Mielswetzski suddenly slapped her forehead.

"Oh!" she said, looking at her husband.

"Oh!" said Mr. Mielswetzski, looking at his wife.

"We completely forgot."

"In all the excitement!"

"We have news."

"Good news!"

"At least we hope you think it's good news," said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"I'm sure she will," said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"Well, you never know."

"Oh, she'll be thrilled!"

Charlotte waited. It often took her parents some time to get to the point. Sometimes she thought that they were actually one person who had been divided into male and female parts by a mad scientist. Anyway, she was in no hurry; her parents' idea of good news did not quite match her own – it tended to involve an outing to History Days or a bout of family therapy. Besides, no news could possibly be better than the news currently curled up on the bench right next to her. Charlotte let her hand rest on Mew's softly breathing belly.

"Well," said Mrs. Mielswetzski, "I've been talking to Uncle John...."

Charlotte perked up. Uncle John and Aunt Suzanne lived in London with their son, Zachary, who was Charlotte's age. The Millers had all come over one summer when Charlotte was six – Charlotte had vague memories of kicking around a soccer ball with her cousin, who kept insisting on calling it a football, and at the time she had thought he was very, very stupid. In the last couple of years Charlotte had repeatedly tried to convince her parents to go to London to visit them – not that she was desperate to visit family she barely remembered, but she was quite interested in going to England. The Mielswetzskis kept saying they might go sometime, when the time was right, maybe next year, maybe for Christmas. Charlotte almost had them convinced this summer, but then Aunt Suzanne's mother died, and Charlotte's mother and father said it wouldn't be right. Charlotte wanted to go to London so badly – life certainly couldn't be so banal in London. She had thought maybe she could even spend a year there sometime, and then she would "try harder" and "meet new people" and "have a better attitude." Someday she was going to live there and take photography lessons; her mother said she'd send her to photography lessons right where they were. That totally

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missed the point. London sounded like the coolest place in the world – though, let's face it, anything for Charlotte would have been better than where she was.

"Well," Charlotte's mother smiled, "Uncle John is going to be transferred back here in the winter! They're going to live right near us. The whole family."

Charlotte tried to mask her disappointment. So much for her glamorous new life abroad. She scratched Mew's ears comfortingly.

"But that's not all," her mother said. "Uncle John and Aunt Suzanne didn't want Zachary to have to start at a new school in the winter. So..." She held out her hands expansively. "Your cousin is going to come live with us. Isn't that great?"

Charlotte blinked. Great wasn't quite the word. Bad wasn't the word either, by any means. It was neither great nor bad, it was entirely without greatness or badness. It was neutral. It simply was. Like school lunch or piano lessons, her cousin's impending arrival seemed to be just a fact of life, one more ordinary thing in what had been – until just that afternoon – an exasperatingly ordinary life.

But Charlotte tried to be enthusiastic for the sake of her mother, and her father smiled at her and said, "See? I knew she'd be delighted." And her mother beamed and said, "Oh, honey. It will be like you have a brother!" And Charlotte smiled and did not say a word, not a word; everything she had to say was expressed by her hand on her kitten's gently humming back.

So all was well in the Mielswetzski house. Charlotte was happy, for the first time in months, and her parents were happy too. They believed everything that they had said to their daughter about Uncle John's transfer and about the reasons for Zachary's sudden move. They had no reason not to; the story certainly made sense. But the fact is, Uncle John had not quite been honest with his sister. He was going to be transferred in the winter, yes, and the whole family would be moving, yes. But he did not mention that he had actually requested the transfer and that winter was the soonest he could get it. He did not mention that the whole reason for the transfer was to move his son away, as soon as possible, and the fact that he was being abruptly taken out of his school and shipped off to America had nothing to do with his education. So Mr. and Mrs. Mielswetzski could not be blamed at all – the liar here was Uncle John. But you must not be too hard on him. He was desperate.