

The Will You Marry Me Tree



Twit-twoo. Twit-twoo.

Welcome to the story of the Will You Marry Me Tree. We've all heard of Romeo and Juliet, their love doomed from the start. But I dare say you have never heard of Bea and Barnaby, the daughter and son of two rival and fearsome witches.

Let me start at the beginning as only the wisest owls do. There were once identical twins named Charisma and Griselle who grew up near Cromers Woods, just half mile from here as the crow flies south. The girls were the first and only born of their parents who had the fortune to own a smallholding with very fertile land. They were neither poor nor rich but never short of food to feed their growing family. Their mother had come from a long line of powerful witches but had denounced her craft when she met her future husband, literally hanging up her broomstick for good and settling down to a life of farming.

As a family, they were happy until the twins' second birthday when it became clear that both had inherited their mother's powers. When Charisma didn't get what she wanted or, sometimes just because she felt like it, terrible storms blew through the house knocking down ornaments and destroying family heirlooms. One day, when she thought her sister had an extra slice of carrot at teatime, she summoned a storm in the middle of summer with hailstones the size and shape of pointy carrots smashing roofs to smithereens and piercing the heart of a poor man working in the fields nearby, killing him instantly.

Don't get me wrong. There were many months of calm when the girls would get along and play games together in the fields or help their par-



Illustration by Megan Metcalf

ents with chores like any other siblings. And, of course, they played the usual childish pranks as young witches often do – turning their father into a toad or filling the house with butterflies. Then there were the peaceful nights when they snuggled up close to their mother, listening to the wonderful tales of the most powerful broomstick in all of Kent, handcrafted from the magical birch trees of Cromers Wood. How it could fly faster than the fastest pony, produce the most delicious chocolate delights if you asked it nicely and, most impressive of all, freeze time for a whole three minutes and three seconds. The twins would beg their mother to release the broomstick just to touch its famed bristles, but she refused, saying the spell holding it high on the wall could never be broken.

As they grew older, it became clear the sisters had very different temperaments. Whereas Griselle was sweet-natured and measured in her magic, the ill-named Charisma could be heard cackling away at her nasty plans and spells. One wrong look in her direction could turn you into a rat or cockroach. Luckily, her sister was always close behind to clear up the mess, turning teachers back from sheep and pigs and fixing broken pots and plates. But when puberty arrived Charisma's temper became so fierce that even Griselle's spells couldn't temper it. One day after her mother told her off for leaving mouldering cheese in her room underneath a giant pile of dirty clothes, Charisma sent a plague of locusts upon the land stripping all the crops before Griselle could undo the damage.

The next day, as her parents returned from the market in Faversham, they had to rub their eyes because the whole house and all the barns appeared to be shaking. On rushing inside, they caught Charisma red-handed, trying to free the broom from the wall. It was a step, or rather a spell too far for her mild-mannered parents. The next day on the pretence of a visit to the sea-side, Charisma was taken to her great-aunt's house in Folkestone and told she wasn't allowed home until she learnt how to control her temper. Her fearsome great-aunt would ensure she'd return as pleasant and as measured as her sister, Griselle.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months until 20 years passed, and Charisma eventually came home on the day of their parent's funeral, both having died of old age within minutes of each other.

Griselle, now married to a local farmer, watched a fine carriage pulled by two beautiful black horses approaching the farm. As it came to a stop, out jumped Charisma, dressed in the finest purple silk followed by a striking young girl, who she introduced everyone to as her daughter, Bea.

'She takes after her father, said Charisma, noticing everyone staring at the girl's long black hair, glistening in the summer sunlight.

'And don't you get any funny ideas, young man. She's your cousin!' she added, glaring at a handsome blue-eyed boy, the spitting image of his mother, Griselle.

Griselle laughed as her youngest son Barnaby blushed as red as a rowan berry and

she gently pushed his jaw closed which had been hanging open in awe at the girl's beauty.

It was soon clear that Charisma hadn't returned because she was grief-stricken. She barged her way into the house, ignoring her dead parents laid out in open coffins and strode straight over to the broomstick hanging on the opposite wall, gazing at it lovingly.

At the funeral, hundreds of mourners came to pay their respects but Charisma and Bea stood at the back of the church, away from the rest of the family. When they returned to the house, Charisma was already positioned next to the broomstick as if protecting it from any other witches – though she was the only one around because, like their mother, Griselle had given up magic after marrying the son of the neighbouring farmer.

'I see you have not wept a tear for our dear parents,' said Griselle after the wake.

'They sent me away to live with that horrible woman. I hate them both.'

'I wrote to you often sister, and mother and father sent you gifts.'

'And? I have only returned for the broom. It is time the child learnt our ways.'

'Why is her father not here?' asked Griselle intrigued about the man brave enough to get close to her sister.

'Why would he be here?'

'To pay his respects?'

At this Charisma doubled up with laughter. Drying her eyes, she said: 'You know what? I've never given him a second thought though I had the unfortunate displeasure of meeting her mother. Evil circus witch,' she added, before clamping her hand over her mouth.

'Charisma. What have you done? Stolen a child?'

'I saved her life! I've given her a good life. She would have died if I hadn't taken her.'

Although shocked by the confession, Griselle bit her tongue. She hadn't practiced her spells for over 10 years and knew she would be weak against her sister, who no doubt killed the poor girl's real mother in some petty feud.

'That was kind of you to take her in, Charisma.'

'Are you being sarcastic, sister? You have learnt the art at last?'

Griselle couldn't help but smile, remembering her sister's wicked sense of humour which had often got them into so much trouble as children.

'A little perhaps but as a mother I know how hard it is to look after a baby. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been to take in a child that isn't your blood.'

'You've certainly been busy,' said Charisma. 'Five?'

'Six. One died just three weeks old,' said Griselle, opening up a beautiful silver locket around her neck which contained some fluffy blonde baby hair.

Charisma squeezed Griselle's hand gently before snatching it away.

'You old brood mare,' she said, disapprovingly.

'Charming as ever, sister.'

‘Husband’s not bad looking though,’ she said elbowing Griselle. ‘And you tell that boy of yours to keep away from my Bea and not a word to anyone that I’m not her real mother. It’d break her heart,’ she added, catching sight of her daughter in the far corner, giggling about something with Barnaby and his siblings.

‘Don’t worry sister. They will never be anything other than cousins,’ said Griselle, ‘They know what happens when the blood of two sister witches blends. I will keep your secret but only if we share the broom.’

Charisma narrowed her eyes at her sister, looking at her with a new-found respect.

‘Well, well. The worm has turned,’ she smiled. ‘Though it pains me to admit it, I have missed you, my sister. We shall keep the broom for six months of the year and in that way we shall always remain friends, never enemies.’

But first they needed to remove the broomstick from the wall. As suspected, their mother had used a secret spell to fix it there, one she’d taken to the grave. The only thing that could move it was sheer force. So Charisma mustered hurricanes, tornadoes and lightning until the very walls of Griselle’s modest family home began to crack. In a fit of frustration, Charisma sent an earthquake ripping through the whole of Kent, destroying houses and causing many injuries, and finally the broomstick came tumbling down along with the walls of the house. Griselle insisted Charisma make good the damage she had wreaked on the county. So, after several hours of replacing chimney pots and healing broken limbs and head wounds, they began work on the broomstick, carefully chipping the bricks away. However, no amount of Charisma’s powerful spells could release it from the bracket and the two bricks it was attached to.

So, the broom-share commenced with the sisters having to adjust the way they used their mother’s broomstick accordingly; flying lower and slower than their mother ever did and though they tried many times, they could not muster its most useful power – to freeze time. However, it was still more powerful than both of their broomsticks put together and Charisma, unsurprisingly, grew reluctant to hand it over, delivering it to the house later and later until six months became seven or eight or even nine.

But Griselle didn’t complain. Now that her mother was no longer with her she was pleased to have Charisma’s company every now and then. Though still prone to bad-tempered outbursts, she had mellowed and they enjoyed reminiscing about the tricks they’d played as children. And when Griselle’s dear husband died two years later after falling from his horse, she was even more pleased to have her sister back in her life.

Her own children also secretly enjoyed wicked Auntie Charisma’s visits when she’d wow them with her famous firework displays and take them for rides on flying rugs. They also grew fond of their cousin Bea, particularly Barnaby, whose looks and kindness were admired by many local girls, though he only had eyes for Bea. A forbidden love, he knew but one he was unable to resist because, listener, you do not choose who you fall in love with. Love chooses you and only a

fool would refuse to follow his or her heart.

Bea had adopted her mother's hardness and at times could appear aloof and cold. She'd become an expert at masking her true feelings thanks to her controlling and, let's face it, dangerous mother. And so, you would never know looking at her and Barnaby together that her heart fluttered with each look or word, and how she counted down the days to see her cousin again wracked with an overwhelming longing, lying awake night after night, tormented by the fact that the one and only boy who held her heart would never be hers. As she grew into her late teens, she was tortured at night by dreams of sinking into the depths of his beautiful blue eyes and feeling the strength of his muscular arms holding her. When she awoke, she burst into tears knowing it would never happen. Then during her 18th year when her mother was threatening to marry her off to the son of a rich landowner, who constantly talked of the benefits of crop rotation, she could bear it no more. She conspired to get Barnaby alone in Cromers Wood on the pretext of identifying a suitable birch tree to make a new broomstick. When his siblings strode ahead several yards, she grabbed him and pushed him up against a large beech tree before throwing herself upon him.

Of course, Barnaby though shocked at this sudden display of passion from his hitherto ice-cold cousin, was overjoyed and responded in the same enthusiastic fashion.

'Our parents will never allow us to be together,' said Barnaby, when they finally pulled themselves apart from their embrace.

'Unless we run away!' said Bea, her big brown eyes shining brightly. 'My mother has put away some money for my dowry. I know where she keeps it - under the floorboards in her bedroom.'

Although no coward, an icy finger stroked Barnaby's spine as he thought of his vengeful aunt discovering their deceit.

'Even if we travel to London, she will hunt us down,' he said.

'And what if she does? Will she really destroy the two people who are most important to her, me and your mother. You may think she is a hateful witch but she talks so fondly of your mother and her nephews and nieces. She is changed since being reunited with Griselle. I'm sure of it.'

'But what of our children, Bea. They will be condemned to a slow painful death.'

Bea lay her head on her cousin's beating heart.

'Then if we cannot be together, I will never love another,' said Bea, looking into Barnaby's eyes.

'And me neither,' said Barnaby.

Bea and Barnaby continued to meet every six months or so depending on how punctual Charisma was with the broom-share. Each time they met at their Beech tree, hiding love letters in the grooves of its bark and stealing innocent kisses, knowing their love was doomed, dreading

the day when their mothers insist they marry someone they didn't love.

On one such day, Charisma and Griselle had been working on their mother's broomsticks, finally managing to free the broomstick from the bracket and bricks. As a celebration, they went for an impromptu fly and found themselves over Cromers Wood. It is fate, listener that caused both sisters to glance down and see their children embracing.

The lovers clung onto one another, terrified to see Charisma, purple with rage, and then Griselle seemingly appear from nowhere.

'Do you love one another?' asked Griselle before her sister could speak.

'Of course!' said Barnaby.

'Then you shall marry.'

'Never!' shouted Charisma.

'But they are not of the same blood, Charisma. It is time she knew the truth.'

'What do you mean aunt?' asked Bea.

'You are not related to each other.'

Charisma let out a long screech so terrible and blood-curdling that all the creatures of the wood ran for their lives and only returned a week later when they were sure Charisma was no longer around.

'Then who is my real mother?' asked Bea.

Charisma stood rooted to the spot like the sweetheart's Beech tree, her eyes bulging and her mouth unable to form any words.

'Did you steal me?' demanded Bea.

'Who clothed you and fed you, Bea?' asked Griselle, upset at seeing her sister so distressed.

'I always thought it strange I look nothing like you and you always refused to tell me of my father...' she said ignoring her aunt. 'Who is my mother? Did you kill her?'

When no answer came, Bea summoned the branches of the trees to reach down, their twigs stretching around Charisma's neck.

'Tell me!' shouted Bea as the rowan trees in the forest shook their branches in disgust at her descent into violence.

'Your mother was nothing but an evil circus witch. She made me look like your fairy godmother...please Bea,' choked Charisma, desperately trying to summon up the strength to free herself. 'She hurt you on purpose to make you cry so she could collect your baby tears to cast her wicked spells. I saw her pinching you with her sharp talons which is why I took you, child, or you would have died before your first birthday.'

'Liar! You are the evil one! Stealing me from my own mother! Where did she live?'

'I beg you, Bea, do not try to find her. She has no conscience.'

'Hypocrite!' screamed Bea. 'Tell me.'

By this point, Charisma was beginning to feel light-headed, and was close to passing out.

'Bea! Let her go! You are killing her,' pleaded Barnaby, shocked how fate could offer them a chance of happiness only to snatch it away.

With one final screech, Bea released the branches throttling Charisma and both she and her mother disappeared in a cloud of putrid yellow smoke.

Well, poor Barnaby was left broken-hearted. He spent every night camping out below their beech tree waiting for Bea to return and all day leaning against it, carving out the words 'Will you marry me?' into the bark, praying she would return and answer him.

Weeks passed and he watched the bluebells burst into life, painting the forest floor blue before withering and dying, unlike his love for Bea which burned with even more intensity. The blossom on the trees came and went and his heart grew heavier and heavier, pushing the Beech tree further and further over, until it was leaning so far, it was in danger of toppling over.

Then three months later, Charisma returned to the house haggard and filthy. She told how she'd found herself in the middle of a muddy turnip field, her broomstick hanging in a birch tree nearby. After recovering from concussion, she'd remembered what had happened at Cromers Wood and the terrible argument came back to her. Thus she began her search, travelling across Kent and beyond looking for her beloved daughter but could find no trace of her, though she kept hearing rumours of a beautiful young girl with raven hair who'd joined a circus troupe led by someone going by the name of Madame Du Boeuf.

'Madame Du Boeuf,' repeated Barnaby, who when not leaning against the Will You Marry Me Tree, spent his time at his aunt's bedside.

'It is French! Though she is no more French than this candle, dear nephew,' said Charisma pointing to a chunky beeswax candle at her bedside.

'Actually, I think mum bought it at the French market in Sittingbourne,' he said.

'Well, no more French than me or you then,' she said.

'What does Du Boeuf mean anyway?' asked Barnaby, thinking it must mean something terrible.

'Beef.'

'What?'

'Madame Du Beef today. Madame Du Stupide tomorrow. She is always changing her name. Anyway, that's why I became suspicious. You see, she had used this name before, many years ago and she must have known I'd been looking for her because the next thing, I know she's cancelled all the shows and disappeared.'

After telling her story, Charisma collapsed and burned with a fever night and day. Griselle prepared the finest herbal medicine and spells to save her sister but all to no avail. There was, as

Barnaby knew only too well, no medicine to treat heartbreak.

‘Perhaps it would have been better to let them marry and not say anything,’ said Charisma during her more lucid moments. ‘I knew she would hate me if I ever told her the truth.’

‘And the truth is?’ asked Griselle.

‘She is the vilest witch on this island. I would never lie to you.’

‘Then I must find her and bring her home,’ said Barnaby.

It was easier said than done. Barnaby, using his grandma’s broomstick, scoured the land, travelling as far as the Outer Hebrides where he stayed for a week with a kind sheep farmer after being brought down by a snowstorm. After six months of travelling, he finally spotted a poster for Madame Du Boeuf’s Magical Circus in a field just outside Birmingham. He flew over the field as the sun rose and spotted a young girl, stooped over and struggling to carry two buckets full of water, stumbling every now and then with the weight. It was only when he flew closer that he saw why: her ankles were chained together. Barnaby watched the poor girl fall, spilling most of the buckets’ contents and an older woman, dressed in expensive silk and jangling with gold necklaces and bracelets flying out of the circus tent wielding a whip. Barnaby didn’t think twice. He swooped down on his grandma’s broomstick, knocking the older woman off her feet. Only when he went to help the poor girl stand, did he realise it was his beloved Bea, her beautiful shiny hair now so entangled it looked as though she’d been dragged through a bush. He picked her up and flew straight home, terrified the circus witch would be close behind.

As soon as Bea saw Charisma she threw herself at her mother’s feet, begging for forgiveness.

‘It is true. You are and have always been my true mother,’ she cried.

Charisma sat up for the first in months and stroked Bea’s wild hair,

‘It is I who should ask for forgiveness.’

‘No, you warned me! She’s a terrible woman. At first she welcomed me in and treated me like her much beloved stolen daughter but a few weeks later, when I refused to perform in her shows, I awoke with chains around my ankles. I was to be her slave before she married me off to the highest bidder. I was helpless. My powers were nothing compared to hers.’

After the wounds around her ankles and sores on her back where she had been whipped into submission had healed, Barnaby suggested they take a walk in Cromers Wood. He was unsure of how Bea felt about him anymore. She’d seemed distant and brooding and even more aloof than usual. While she was away, he spent many sleepless nights thinking she’d married already, never imagining the trauma she’d lived through, but now his restless nights were taken up with worries about whether she still loved him. So much time had passed for both of them. She went for walks across the fields with her mother, always refusing his company. Griselle told him to give her time. She’d had a terrible shock at first finding out the woman who had brought her up wasn’t her real mother, then to find out that her real mother was a monster.

'I thought you would never ask,' smiled Bea as she took his arm.

They walked in silence, shy of each other like they were the first time they'd met.

'Bea, I have something to show you...well, I mean to *ask* you,' he said blushing, fearing Bea's sharp wit would twist his words.

'Really? And me too,' she said, trying not to grin before catching sight of their beech tree now leaning over thanks to Barnaby's heavy heart.

'I waited for you for so long,' he said pointing up at the 'Will you marry me?' etched into the bark. 'I'd still be waiting for you. Forever.'

'And I have already given you my answer,' said Bea.

Barnaby did a doubletake because etched in big letters were the words YES encircled in a love heart.

The End

Story written by Michele Sheldon

**HAND OF DOOM
PRODUCTIONS**



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