

Charles Bewitched

Chapter One

September 1837

Mage's Tutterow, Hampshire, England

It wasn't till much later that Charles Leland remembered the odd occurrence outside the church before his sister Persephone's wedding. But by the time he understood its significance, it was much too late.

Her wedding morning was sunny and warm for late September, and almost as glowing as Persy herself. Charles had sneaked in to see her after she was dressed in her pale cream Brussels lace dress while her maid Lorrie did her hair. It was hard to accept that his sisters were old enough to marry, even though Persy had always seemed to know everything.

"At least you're not going too far away," he said to her, then cleared his throat awkwardly. Persy was marrying Lochinvar Seton, the son of their neighbor the Earl of Northgalis, so it wouldn't be as if she was *really* going away. The Setons' home, Galiswood, was only a few miles from their own house, Mage's Tutterow.

"No more than a short ride," Persy agreed. "Now that you're almost twelve, maybe Mama and Papa will let you ride over by yourself to visit us when you're home on holidays."

"Do you think so? That would be topping!" That would let him study with Persy during his holidays from Eton. Now that he'd proven he had some of the family's ancient magical abilities, he was going to learn all he could. And it would also let him see Lochinvar's stallion, Lord Chesterfield, who was the most splendid horse in all of England. Now *that* was important. "Will you tell them you think I'm old enough? Thanks, Perse!"

He lunged forward to hug her, but Lorrie neatly stepped in his way, brandishing a curling iron. She stared at it for a second until it started to glow, then pointed it at him.

"In case you'd forgotten, your sister is getting married in two hours and I have to finish her hair before then," she said, frowning down her nose at him though she was barely two inches taller than he was. "Why don't you go comb your own, while you're about it?"

"Good idea," said Persy's twin, Penelope, from where she stood by the window. She

turned and examined him, then shook her head. “And maybe get Papa’s valet to retie your cravat, Chuckles. You look like you just narrowly escaped death by hanging.”

On second thought, maybe it was a good thing that Persy was getting married and Pen traveling to Ireland with their former governess and her new husband for some months to further her magical studies. Sometimes sisters were more than a man could stomach. He retired to the hallway and thought about soothing his wounded dignity with a hovering spell—one of his specialties, now—but the housekeeper, Mrs. Groening, was doing her own hovering just outside the door, hoping to be called in to help, so he retreated to his room.

But once they all got in the carriages that would take them down to the church in the village of Atherston, he felt much better. He was standing up with Lochinvar as groomsman, after all. That should help send a subtle hint to his parents that he was practically an adult.

Lochinvar was waiting in the vestibule of the small Norman church. He looked as happy as Persy had, and his cravat was flawlessly tied, Charles couldn’t help noticing. Hmm. Perhaps it was time to pay a little more attention to such niceties, especially if it made him seem more grown-up. He and Lochinvar hurried into the church lest Lochinvar catch sight of Persy as she alighted from the carriage, for the groom wasn’t supposed to see his bride before the wedding.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered to Lochinvar as they walked up the nave between the pews full of murmuring guests and villagers. “Persy’s fine. Her dress is horripilatoriously fluffy, but she doesn’t look half bad. You’ll see.”

“Not half bad, you say?” Lochinvar made a funny face, pressing his lips together then looking away. “Thank you, Charles,” he said gravely after a minute. “That makes me feel better.”

“You’re welcome,” Charles replied from the corner of his mouth. Grandmother Leland, seated in the second row, was looking at him with that expression on her face and he didn’t dare offer Lochinvar any more brotherly reassurance.

They took their places to the side of the chancel and waited. Mr. Hamble, the sexton’s brother, played something churchy and meandering on the organ to fill the waiting, glancing behind him occasionally in a small mirror to see if it was time to launch into the processional. Then the vicar emerged from a side door and came to stand opposite them. He and Lochinvar exchanged nods, so Charles nodded too. The vicar’s eyes crinkled.

More waiting. What was taking so long? The family had all arrived at the same time, after all. Maybe Pen had to re-fluff all the flounces on Persy’s dress, or one of the

village dogs had jumped on her with muddy paws, or *something*. The congregation was still quiet, but a subtle rustle of silk and bombazine said that they too were growing impatient. Across the chancel, the vicar cleared his throat.

A dull thud, followed by a babble of voices, broke the unquiet silence. The thud must have been the outer door of the church...but why the bustle? Then the inner door opened and Mama appeared in the doorway, her cheeks pink and her eyes snapping blue sparks that Charles could see even from where he stood. That was a bad sign. But she took the arm of the sexton calmly enough and let him lead her to the first pew. Then Mr. Hamble started playing, loudly and joyously this time, and Pen was walking up the nave. She too looked flustered, but not unduly so. And there behind her, on Papa's arm, was Persy.

Next to him, Lochinvar stirred.

Once all the solemn ceremony of Papa giving Persy's hand to Lochinvar and all that had happened, Charles had a chance to examine Persy for muddy paw prints. But she was unsullied...at least, mostly. Caught in the lace flounces of her skirt and veil and in the long curls on her shoulders were what looked like bits of flower petals and dried leaves and greenish-brown dust. She couldn't have tripped and fallen, could she? That would account for the fuss...but the churchyard was newly mown and trimmed and raked and swept for this important occasion. So where had the bits of plant all over her come from?

After that, though, the ceremony went smoothly apart from Persy sneezing twice. She and Lochinvar gazed at each other with the moony expression that they often wore when together, only even moonier than usual. Ha. *He'd* never look at someone that way, by Jupiter—especially not a *girl*. And then they were walking back down the nave, both of them grinning, and he had to take Pen's arm and follow after.

"What happened?" he muttered to her under cover of the organ's loud rejoicing. "What took you so long?"

"Oh, just something silly," Pen muttered back. "Right before we were about to go in, this rickety old beggar appeared from nowhere and started throwing handfuls of flower petals and stuff at Persy and nattering nonsense about how pretty she was and how she'd be his bride someday, and then he actually kissed her. He was obviously feeble-minded or a lunatic. We shooed him off and hurried her inside but didn't want to brush the stuff off and stain her dress, so we shook off what we could, except that it didn't seem to want to come off."

"Oh." Where had the beggar come from? There weren't usually any around, although bands of gypsies sometimes traveled through the village in the spring and fall.

They followed Persy and Lochinvar out through the vestibule and into the brilliant sunshine, where everyone immediately pounced on the bride and groom to offer their felicitations. Charles cast a longing glance toward the churchyard, where a row of horse chestnut trees provided excellent conkers for shying at squirrels, but fear of Mama and Grandmother Leland and Grandmother Revesby, whose combined powers of observation were fearsome, kept him from wandering. Still, he couldn't help squinting up at the mightiest horse chestnut at the back of the yard, just in case they'd started to ripen and fall—

A movement by the lych gate leading into the churchyard caught his attention. Just behind one of the gate's supporting pillars was a hooded figure clad in rags and a tattered cloak of greenish brown, gazing out at the crowd of well-wishers around Persy and Lochinvar. Could it be the beggar who'd bothered Persy?

He began to edge slowly around the throng toward the gate to get a better look. Something about the beggar didn't seem right—the way he stood so tall and straight and still, maybe, when Pen had called him old and rickety? Or the fact that when presented with a crowd of merry-makers like this, crazy beggars were supposed to caper about and ask for alms, whatever those were...not lurk behind pillars, watching in silence?

“Charles!” His mother's voice startled him. “*There* you are. Do come along, child. The carriage is here, and your grandparents are waiting.” She took his arm and tugged. “You know how cranky Grandpapa gets if he has to wait. You can come back and look for conkers tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Charles let her propel him away from the gate where the beggar still stood and through the crowd to the carriage waiting in the lane. He climbed in obediently and sat next to Papa, facing the back. No matter. It had just been a dotty old beggar who thought his sister was pretty, no more.

The coach jolted and began to inch slowly up the lane behind the one holding Persy and Lochinvar, back to Mage's Tutterow where they'd have the wedding breakfast and drink toasts to a long life and a large, healthy family for his sister and new brother-in-law. Good lord—if Persy were to have a baby, that would make *him* an uncle. Mama and Papa would just have to let so important a personage as an uncle ride to Galiswood any time, wouldn't they? He grinned to himself. Yes, definitely.

The coach crept past the churchyard. Still smiling, Charles glanced out the window and felt his glee fade. The beggar was watching them drive away, leaning back against the lych gate barely twenty feet away with his arms crossed on his broad chest, hood thrown back to reveal dark, shoulder-length hair and a narrow, handsome face, pale and unlined. Charles met his eyes and nearly jumped in his seat. They were cold, those eyes,

and filled with an amused, icy triumph that momentarily chilled the warm autumn day.
Then they passed the gate, and the beggar disappeared from Charles's sight.

Want to read more? [Find Charles Bewitched here!](#)

Copyright © 2013 Marissa Doyle