

Clare and Max and the Sleeping Beauty

By

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For Cecilia,
Elisabeth
and Meirion



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Chapter One

Clare and Max found out one day that Aunty Finn was coming to take them out. This should have made them very happy, because Aunty Finn was a very nice person. But the sort of places Aunty Finn liked taking Clare and Max were not exactly the sort of places that Clare and Max liked to go. Clare was eight and Max was six. Clare liked asking questions and Max liked to shout. They both thought that they would much rather go out in a boat on the river, or to the zoo, or to the park, than wherever it was Aunty Finn would take them.

Aunty Finn liked old houses and stately homes, places where Clare and Max had to walk and not talk and pretend to be interested in pictures of battles that were actually quite boring, or hear long stories that Aunty Finn would read out of a book, about Earl This-and-that or Baroness That-and-the-other. They couldn't run anywhere, in case they bumped something, or touch anything, in case they smashed it.

"Do we *have* to go?" they asked their mother.

"Yes you have to," said Mrs Bingham. "It's very *kind* of Aunty Finn and you have to be polite."

Then they heard Aunty Finn's car on the drive outside.

"Hello children!" Aunty Finn called sunnily out of the car window. "Who wants to spend a fun afternoon at a *castle*!?"

Max and Clare looked at each other. Maybe a castle wouldn't be so bad.

"Come on then," said Aunty Finn. "We haven't got all day."

So Clare climbed in the front seat and Max climbed in the back, and Aunty Finn made sure they were wearing their seatbelts, before they started off.

"A friend told me about this place," Aunty Finn shouted over the engine as they drove. "I had never heard of it before. I'm sure you'll love it."

"Can we have cream cakes in a tea shop?" Max asked.

"Maybe after we've seen around," Aunty Finn replied. "I'm sure there will be lots of fascinating things there. It will be jam-crammed with History and Romance."

"Suits of armour?" asked Max.

"Jewels and secret passages?" asked Clare.

"I'm sure there will be all of that," said Aunty Finn.

A while later, they were out of the city and driving into the country. At first there were fields on either side of the road, and farmhouses. Then there was a forest, and Clare saw a deer. The trees in the forest seemed to be rather thick and thorny, and Clare thought that they got thicker and thornier the further they went. Sometimes thorn branches grew out across the road. This made Aunty Finn cross.

“They could maintain this better,” she said. “And I must say they haven’t sign-posted very well. I don’t think I’ve seen a single sign-post.”

At the next bend in the road they came across someone on a horse and they had to slow right down because the road was narrow. Clare loved horses, but Aunty Finn was cross again.

“Typical. He’s not even wearing a crash cap,” she said. “What are people coming to? They have no sense of responsibility these days.”

“It’s a lovely horse,” said Clare.

The man on the horse seemed determined to ride in front of them. Aunty Finn had to slow the car down to a crawl. But at least the thorns seemed to have disappeared. Instead the bushes were full of roses. The road twisted and turned. Sometimes it almost looked as if the rose bushes had grown right across the road, but the closer they drove they saw that the road went on after all. It was almost as if the rose bushes were opening up and letting them through. Aunty Finn said, “I wonder if we’re almost there?”

Then suddenly there was a gap in the rose bushes and in front of them was the castle. It was immense with flying coloured flags. Max counted four towers, one on each corner. At the front there was a bridge leading over a moat, and at the end of the bridge there was a huge wooden doorway.

“I don’t see a sign to the carpark, do you?” said Aunty Finn. “Maybe if we just park here.”

They parked the car and got out. The horseman had gone, Clare noticed. Aunty Finn said, “Come on, troops,” and strode off across the gravel driveway towards the door. “I still don’t see any signs,” she remarked to Clare, and to Max she said, “Shout if you see any.”

They went over the bridge and right up to the door. It was the tallest door Clare and Max had ever seen. It was taller than three Aunty Finn’s standing on top of each other.

“It’s probably taller than a dinosaur,” said Max.

The door was open.

“There’s no sign about admission, but if the door is open, I don’t suppose they’re closed for business,” said Aunty Finn. She looked down at Clare and Max. “Shall we?” she said.

They went through.

Chapter Two

They were standing in a courtyard. There was nobody about. It was quiet and utterly still. Across the courtyard was strung a huge banner, that said, “Welcome All on this Joyous Occasion.”

“I suppose that makes it all right,” Aunty Finn said, but she sounded doubtful. “I still wish that there was someone we could talk to who could tell us where to go.”

“Maybe we’ve come in the wrong door,” suggested Clare.

“I want to see a suit of armour,” said Max.

Aunty Finn thought a bit and then made up her mind. “Let’s walk around a bit,” she said. “Then we can see if we can find a place that sells guide books, or even better, we might find a guide.”

“This way,” said Clare.

They walked across the courtyard and into one of the rooms on the other side. It was a long room with a raised platform at one end and wooden tables lined up facing the platform. There was a table on the platform as well, only this table was covered with a gold and red tablecloth. It was very dusty. There was dust on everything.

“I don’t think much of the way they keep this place,” said Aunty Finn. “It doesn’t seem very hygienic.”

They went through this room and through another room that was full of stone arches. There was a door in the wall of this room that lead outside, and Aunty Finn said, “Let’s go out here.”

They went out and found themselves in a stable yard. There were no horses, just rows and rows of stalls that were empty of everything except dust. Clare and Max and Aunty Finn wandered around the corner of the stalls and found another yard. There was a pump in the middle of the yard and a water trough. The pump had obviously been used recently because there was a trickle of water on the cobbles. By the water trough, the man they had followed to the castle was giving his horse a drink.

“At last!” said Aunty Finn, and she went striding over to talk to him. He looked up in surprise. He was a tall man and Clare thought he was very handsome. He had a long brown curling moustache and a hat with a feather in it.

“Good afternoon!” said Aunty Finn. “At last I’ve found someone who seems to work here!”

“Good day to you, ma’am,” the man said, very politely. “But I’m afraid you are mistaken, I do not work here.”

“You know something about the place though, don’t you?” Aunty Finn persisted.

“Oh yes,” said the man, looking up at the castle. “I mean to live here very soon.”

“*Live here?*” said Aunty Finn. “Does that mean you’ll close it to the public?”

“By no means. My threshold shall belong to anyone who cares to seek shelter within,” the man said, in a dreamy voice. Then he caught sight of Clare and Max.

“Who are these enchanting children?” he said.

“This is my niece, and my nephew,” said Aunty Finn. “We came to spend the day here – we enjoy looking at such historical, romantic sights.”

“Ah yes,” said the man. “Honoured madam, what a way you have with words! This is indeed a place of history, of romance. This is a castle whose very fabric is woven in with dreams and spells and the words of lovers.” He looked shyly at Aunty Finn. “And with the words of poets, of course.”

“Gosh,” said Aunty Finn, suddenly blushing. “How did you know?”

“Clare,” Max said, “I don’t like this man. He talks like he’s on television. Can’t we go and look for a suit of armour?”

“I think we should,” said Clare, who didn’t think her aunt was getting anywhere.

“Of course, my poems have been published in a few anthologies,” Aunty Finn was saying, when Clare tugged at her hand. “What is it, Clare? Can’t you see I’m talking?”

“Max and I want to look around,” Clare said. “Can’t we? On our own, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s safe at all,” said Aunty Finn.

“But why not?” said the man with the moustache. “It is perfectly safe. No one here would hurt a child and there are no evils here to harm them. They will be safe.”

“They could get lost,” Aunty Finn said.

“Not the niece and the nephew of a lady with a mind such as yours!” said the man. “And besides, this is not such a big castle. They can find their way back here easily enough.”

“Oh, all right,” said Aunty Finn. “But Clare, make sure that you’re back here in an hour. And Clare, if Max needs to go to the bathroom, follow the signs.”

“Of course,” said Clare. She was actually worried. It was unusual of Aunty Finn to let them off on their own. She never had before. What was happening to her? But Clare was too pleased to argue. She turned and grabbed Max’s hand.

“Remember, one hour!” Aunty Finn called after them, as they ran across the stable yard into the house. Left alone with the man with the moustache, she said to him, “But how did you know I was a poet?”

“Lady, as soon as I heard you speak, I knew you could be nothing else,” he said, pressing his hand to his heart.

And Aunty Finn blushed. Again.



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Chapter Three

They found a suit of armour in the very next room. After Max had stared at it for a while, and touched it as much as he liked, Clare got impatient and told him she wanted to go and look for jewels.

“Silly old jewels,” Max said, as she towed him away.

It was obvious that there was something very wrong with the castle. They found this the more they explored. They didn't see a single soul. All the time there was a peculiar silence. And it also looked as if the place had been left in a hurry. They found an overturned goblet that had spilt something all over the flagstones. They found a plate with hard black lumps on it that looked like food, which had been left for a long long time. They climbed into the gallery and saw that someone had carelessly thrown a trumpet on the floor. They went into a bedroom, and found that someone had climbed out of bed and left their bedclothes in a heap.

“I don't like this,” said Max. “Let's go.”

“No, I want to find the jewels,” Clare said. “Think. Where might there be some jewels?”

“In a secret room at the top of a tower,” Max said. “After we've found the jewels, can we go?”

They found the bottom of a tower at the end of a long gallery filled with paintings. The tower was very thin and the staircase wound round and round. Clare held Max's hand and they started up. It was a very long staircase and half way up Max began to cry. It was very hot in the tower and his hand was slippery in Clare's.

“Not long now,” Clare said, cheerfully, pretending to be Aunty Finn. “We're almost there.”

“But what if the jewels are in a *different* tower?” Max wailed. “Then we'll have to climb all the way down and all the way up again...”

“Shut up,” Clare said, suddenly. “This is it. The secret room.”

There was a heavy wooden door that was not quite closed. Through the crack, Clare could see dust spinning in the room.

“Let's lean on it,” she said to Max. “Come on!”

They leant on the door and it creaked and swung open. Clare and Max found they were in a tiny round room. There was a bed in the room, and a chair, and at the foot of the bed there was an old, dusty spinning wheel. But that wasn't all. Lying on the bed was a beautiful girl. She was older than Clare, but younger than Aunty Finn. She had gorgeous golden hair that was spread out all over the pillow, and a gorgeous blue and green and gold dress that was spread

half across the bed and half across the floor. Sticking out of the bottom of the dress were two pink feet.

“Max!” Clare said. “Now I know what was wrong! This is Sleeping Beauty! And this is Sleeping Beauty’s castle!”

Max was still in a bad mood. “Silly old Sleeping Beauty,” he said, sniffing.

“How can you say that?” said Clare. “She’s beautiful!”

“What a silly big dress,” said Max.

“And I bet that man with Aunty Finn is the Prince,” Clare went on. “Did you see how those thorns turned into roses? And that’s why there aren’t any people. Except that I thought all the people were supposed to fall asleep when Sleeping Beauty did. I wonder what happened to them?”

“Maybe they woke up,” Max suggested.

Clare shrugged. “I don’t know. But I do know one thing, and that is the Prince isn’t going to want to kiss Sleeping Beauty any more.”

Max stared at her. “Why not?”

“Because of Aunty Finn, that’s why,” Clare said. “He likes Aunty Finn better.”

“Poor Sleeping Beauty,” said Max.

“There’s only one thing to do,” said Clare. “You’ll have to kiss her yourself.”

“Yuck! Why should *I* kiss her?” Max said. “*I* don’t want to kiss her!”

“Because it won’t work if I do it,” said Clare. “Hurry up, or you never know, she might have to sleep here for another hundred years.”

“Good,” said Max. “I don’t care. I want to go to the bathroom.”

“Oh Max!” said Clare, losing her temper. “You always want to go to the bathroom when it’s important. Look, I’ll prove it to you and kiss her myself. Then you’ll see that she won’t wake up for *me*.”

“Go on then,” said Max.

So Clare kissed her. Nothing happened. She didn’t even stir.

“Oh, all right then,” said Max, so *he* kissed her. But still nothing happened.

Clare burst into tears.

“It’s not fair!” she sobbed. “It’s all that silly Prince’s fault. And Aunty Finn’s!”

Just then the door burst open. Aunty Finn and the Prince came rushing in. They were both red-faced and angry.

“Where have you *been* you naughty children?” said Aunty Finn. “We’ve been looking all over for you. You’ve been gone for hours and hours and – oh!” she caught sight of the Princess. “A re-enactment. How clever!”

“It’s not an actment,” said Clare. “It’s real. This is Sleeping Beauty, and she needs a kiss to wake her up, but we tried that, and it didn’t work!” She burst out crying again.

“But it has to be the kiss of true love. At least, that’s what the story says,” Aunty Finn said.

They all turned to look at the Prince.

“Do not look at me, good people,” he said. “I do not wish to wake her any more – I will have to marry her, and I do not wish to marry her.” He looked deeply at Aunty Finn and she looked deeply back.

“But it’s not fair to leave her just lying there,” Clare said.

“If the Prince does not love her, he probably couldn’t wake her up anyhow,” said Aunty Finn. “I think we had better all go away and forget about it.”

“That’s not being very *responsible*,” said Clare.

“Well, I just don’t know what we should do,” said the Prince.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Max said.

Aunty Finn sighed. “Look here, I’ll take Max down to the bathroom – if they have bathrooms in this awful castle. And you and Clare stay here and *don’t move*, and try meanwhile to think of something we can do.”

“A marvellous suggestion, from a marvellous mind,” said the Prince.

Aunty Finn held her hand out for Max. “Come on then,” she said. “Let’s go and be quick about it.”

“Careful!” Clare shouted.

But it was just too late. Aunty Finn had leant against the spinning wheel.



Chapter Four

Aunty Finn sank into a heap on the floor. Max and Clare jumped out of the way. The Prince jumped to catch her, but he was too late. He bumped into the bed instead, and the Princess sat up and blinked.

“Show thyself, mine own true deliverer,” she said. She sounded as if she had read that in a book.

Clare and Max and the Prince turned to look at her. Sitting up she was even more beautiful than she was asleep, even though her hair was messy and her eyes bulged.

“I do not believe one of you helped me!” she said. “Which was it that delivered me from my enchanted sleep?”

“I do not know, fair Madam,” said the Prince. “But another unfortunate lady has just been pricked by the spinning wheel and is in an enchanted slumber.”

“Then the enchantment can only work for one, and I have been robbed of my kiss of true love,” the Princess said. “But at least I am awake and can sight the blessed sun with mine own eyes.”

“Er,” said the Prince.

“But can’t you *do* something?” Clare said.

“Do something?” The Princess blinked at her. “She has yet to sleep for a hundred years.”

“She can’t sleep for a hundred years!” Clare said. “She has to take us home by bedtime.”

“And we have to have cream buns at a tea shop first,” said Max.

Clare turned on the Prince. “Kiss her!” she said. “You have to kiss her!”

“With pleasure,” said the Prince, and he bent down and planted a kiss on Aunty Finn’s lips. Aunty Finn woke up.

“What happened?” she said.

“You went to sleep and were woken up by the kiss of true love,” Clare said happily. “And now everything is all right.”

“The kiss of true love?” said Aunty Finn.

“That isn’t fair,” the Princess announced loudly. She flounced off the bed. “That was supposed to be *my* kiss. I demand a kiss!”

“Just think yourself lucky you’re awake,” Aunty Finn advised her. “Believe me, you’re much better off than you could be.”

“But my kiss!” said the Princess.

“You have to earn it. You can’t just sleep for a hundred years and then expect everything to fall in your lap. No offence, your Highness,” Aunty Finn said, briskly, as the Prince helped her off the floor. “Now, I suggest that we go

downstairs, and Max can find the bathroom, and then we can all find those cream teas.”

“But my family will be expecting me to come to them with a bridegroom!” said the Princess. “I can’t go down empty handed.”

“I’m sure there will be hundreds of other Princes,” Clare said, consolingly. “There are in my book.”

“That’s just a *book*,” said the Princess. “This is real life.”

“Come on, come on,” said Aunty Finn.

They all went down the tower steps. Aunty Finn held the Prince’s hand and Clare held Max’s hand. The Princess held her long long skirt. As they climbed down, Clare heard her say over and over again, “What a waste of a hundred years.”

At the bottom they met with a surprise. Instead of silence and an empty castle, there were suddenly hundreds of people, rushing about and generally cheering. When they saw the Princess come round the foot of the stairs they stopped rushing about all of a sudden and threw their hats in the air and gave a big yell all together.

“Where did all these people come from, all of a sudden?” Aunty Finn said to the Prince.

A man who was near them overheard.

“The wicked witch got bored, with everyone in the kingdom asleep,” he said. He winked at Clare and gave Max a plum. “So she spirited everyone off to her castle where we all had a jolly good party for the last one hundred years.” He gave Max another plum. “Then she fixed it so that you would come to the castle to meet the Prince, so the Prince couldn’t kiss the Princess, and the Princess wouldn’t wake up, and the witch would have another hundred years of company. She’s a very lonely witch,” he added.

“But the Princess *did* wake up, thanks to us,” said Clare.

“Right, so the witch had to bring us all back here to welcome her, because that was part of the enchantment,” said the man.

“*Now* what’s going to happen?” asked Aunty Finn.

“Well, the Princess will have to officially greet her worthy parents, the King and Queen,” said the man, bowing vaguely in the Princess’ direction.

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant, what’s going to happen to the Princess?” said Aunty Finn.

The man gave Max a handkerchief to wipe the plum juice that was trickling down his chin.

“Whatever the Princess wants, I suppose,” he said.

“What the Princess *wants*, is to have something to eat. I’m starving,” said the Princess, stepping forward. She turned to Aunty Finn and the Prince, still standing holding hands, and to Clare and Max, who were still sucking plums,

and said, “You might not have given me the kiss of true love, but you *did* wake me up, and I’m grateful. So the least I can do is invite you to my banquet. Even if it isn’t a wedding banquet,” she added, under her breath.

“We would be delighted,” said the Prince.

“That would be even better than cream teas,” said Aunty Finn. “Wouldn’t it?” she asked Clare.

“I think so,” Clare said.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Max said.

Later on, they all sat in the banquet hall, eating at the long tables they had seen earlier. The tables had been dusted. On the platform, the Princess was sitting with her parents, the King and the Queen, and there was an empty chair beside her.

“I feel sorry for the Princess,” Clare said, through a mouthful of roast partridge.

“So do I,” said Aunty Finn.

Max was silent, sucking his fingers.

“I don’t suppose she’ll have long to wait before she finds a suitor,” said the Prince. “She’s very beautiful.” Aunty Finn looked cross.

“What was that man’s name, who talked to us? I liked him,” said Clare.

“His name was Peregrine. He told me. When he gave me the plums,” said Max.

“Perhaps she could marry him,” Clare suggested.

“I don’t think Princesses marry their servants,” the Prince said. “But she could do worse.”

“Eat up, eat up,” Aunty Finn said. “It’s almost your bedtime, and we don’t want your parents to be worried.”

“I like it here,” Max said, unexpectedly. “Can we come back?”

“One day, perhaps,” Aunty Finn said. “But I think you’ve had enough History and Romance for today.”

“Ah, the words of a master poet!” said the Prince, casting up his eyes.

Clare and Max looked at each other. And Clare winked.

The End

