

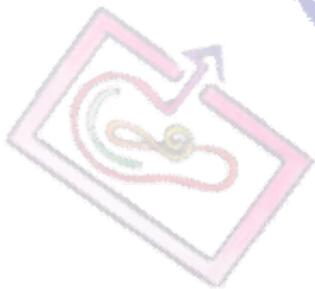
Clare and Max and the Princess' Second Chance

By

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For Cecilia
Elisabeth and
Meirion,
Again



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Chapter One

When Aunt Finn married the Prince, Clare was a bridesmaid and Max was a page. Clare loved her bridesmaid's dress, which was long and golden, with fifteen petticoats and a long train. She thought it was much more beautiful than Aunt Finn's dress, which was just plain old white. Max hated *his* costume. Because he was a page he had to wear a red velvet suit, with white stockings and a lace collar. He complained all the time that it itched. He wanted to be a page in his Tyrannosaurus Rex costume, but Aunt Finn wouldn't let him.

The wedding was held at the Prince's old castle, which Clare and Max thought wasn't nearly as nice as the castle where they met the Princess. It only had one tower and no rose bushes. But Aunt Finn liked it better.

"It'll be much easier to keep clean," she said. "Could you imagine me dusting in that other place? It would take me three weeks to get it right!"

After the wedding was over, Aunt Finn and the Prince went off for a nice honeymoon, and Clare and Max went home. At home there was nothing to do except squabble. Somehow everything that they had liked to do before now seemed dull and boring. Max left open the door of the hamster cage, and the hamster got loose and chewed the wires behind the television. Their father was very angry. Clare was naughty and wouldn't do her piano practice, and she got sent early to bed.

"I wish Aunt Finn had never met that silly old Prince," Max said.

"I wish Aunt Finn had never taken us to that silly old castle in the first place," said Clare.

The next day was just as bad. Max broke the head off one of Clare's dolls and Clare slapped him. Max burst in to tears.

"What *are* we going to do with you two?" said Mrs. Bingham. "Max, stop that. Clare, come here. I can see we have to think of something right now."

"I don't *want* to do anything," said Max.

"I don't *want* to think of something," said Clare.

"Well, I've already thought of something," said their mother. "I think you should go and visit the Princess. After all, she is probably just as bored as you are and I'm sure she would like some visitors."

Clare looked at Max and Max looked at Clare. Max wiped his nose on his sleeve. Clare said, "How will we get there?"

"I'm sure Daddy will drive you," said their mother. "Just ask him nicely."

Max ran off to ask. Clare went to put on her bridesmaid's dress, because she couldn't go and visit a Princess in just *any* old dress. When she came downstairs, holding her skirt up so she wouldn't trip, Max and her father were standing by the front door waiting for her. Max had a plastic dinosaur in his hand.

"What's *that* for?" Clare wanted to know.

Max clutched it against his chest. "I want to give it to her. I know she'll like it."

Their father drove them to the castle. Clare sat in the front and shouted directions. When they got to the castle their father stopped the car on the gravel drive and then all got out. Clare led them proudly to the door, and Max pulled on the big bell pull, but he wasn't strong enough and their father had to help him. The bell made a great clanging sound, and suddenly the man called Peregrine was there at the door to meet them.

"It's Max and Clare!" he said. He looked glad to see them.

"Do you have any plums?" asked Max.

“Max, that’s not very polite,” said their father.

Peregrine winked at Max. “Oh, that’s alright,” he said. “I don’t have any plums, but I do have a nice big peach. I saved it specially for you.” He put his hand in his pocket and took it out. It was the biggest peach Max had ever seen.

“Say thank you,” said Mr. Bingham.

“Thank you,” said Max.

Peregrine ruffled Max’s hair. “You’re welcome,” he said. Then he said, “I take it that these two have come to see the Princess. She’s not here just at the moment. She went off to the pond by herself this morning. If you run round the back there you’ll probably find her.”

“Run along children,” said their father. “And Max, remember your manners.”

Clare and Max ran off and they heard Peregrine say behind them, “Would you like to come in, Sir?”

Behind the castle there was a woody patch. Clare thought that the pond would be in there somewhere. She charged into the trees, holding her skirt out of the way of the thorns and the nettles. Max came after her, slowly, because he was eating the peach.

“Wait for me!” he said.

Clare stamped over bushes. A branch snagged her skirt and when she pulled it away it tore a hole in it.

“Wait for me!” Max said, running up.

At that moment they saw the pond. The Princess was sitting by the pond and she was playing with a small round ball, tossing it up in the air and then catching it again.

“Hello Princess!” Clare called. The Princess turned round and saw them.

“Clare!” she called. “Max! How nice to see you! Come here and talk to me.”

Clare and Max went round the side of the pond.

“Sit here. There’s a lovely bit of soft moss,” said the Princess. “Clare, what a pretty dress!”

Clare beamed. Max sat down next to the Princess and showed her the dinosaur he had brought.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” said the Princess.

“It’s for you,” Max said. “I brought it for you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said the Princess. She gave him a kiss. Max pretended to look cross, but really he was very pleased. “It’s the nicest thing I’ve ever had,” said the Princess. “Much nicer than my silly old golden ball.”

“Is it really golden?” Clare asked.

“Yes. Solid gold,” said the Princess, carelessly.

“We’ve never seen a golden ball before,” Max explained.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen *anything* gold before,” said Clare.

The Princess was surprised. “Here you go then,” she said. “Have a look.”

She tossed it across to Clare. Clare tried to catch it, but she wasn’t quite quick enough. The ball slipped through her fingers, bounced on the moss, and with a little glooping sound, it fell in to the pond.

Chapter Two

"My ball!" cried the Princess. "Now I've lost it!"

"No, I can still see it," Clare said. "It's lying on the bottom there."

Sure enough, the ball was lying at the bottom of the pond, gleaming through the water.

"Now what am I going to do?" said the Princess. "Clare, can you see a stick that we could fetch it out with?"

Clare looked around and found a branch. Because her dress was so lovely, and the Princess' dress was so lovely, they didn't want to spoil them. They made Max lie on the edge of the bank and try to fish out the ball with the stick. It wasn't easy because Max wouldn't put down his peach, and anyway, his arms weren't long enough. He nearly fell in and the Princess had to catch him by the seat of his shorts.

"This won't do," said the Princess. "We'll have to think of another way."

"Maybe Max can run back to the castle and fetch Peregrine. I'm sure he would help," suggested Clare.

"All right," the Princess said, reluctantly. "I supposed he'll have to if we can't think of anything better."

Max scrambled up off the moss to run, and just then a frog jumped out of the pool right onto the Princess' lap. The Princess screamed and jumped backwards, but Max said through his peach, "It's only a little frog!" and he plucked it off the Princess' skirt. The frog sat on the palm of his hand and blinked at him.

"Isn't it all slimy and horrible?" the Princess said. "Eugh! I hate frogs!"

"Isn't she impolite?" said the frog, peevishly. "All I did was come up here to offer her my assistance."

"It can talk!" Clare said.

"Well, it shouldn't say rude things about me," said the Princess, getting angry. "Nobody should ever say anything rude about a *Princess*."

"Well, I'm a Prince in disguise, and you shouldn't say rude things about *me*," said the frog. "But then I don't really expect you to believe me. Nobody has before."

"We believe you," Clare said, earnestly, leaning close. "We've read the story, me and Max."

"I don't believe you. *I've* never read any story about a frog that was a Prince in disguise. How perfectly silly," said the Princess.

"Yes, it's true!" said Clare. "He helps you get the ball back, and then he has to sit next to you at dinner and sleep on your pillow and then he turns in to a Prince and he marries you."

"Just like the Prince did who kissed me awake?" said the Princess archly. "And I can't *bear* the idea of a nasty slimy frog on my pillow!"

"Never mind her," said Max to the frog. "Could you just get the ball please? We'll try and talk to her and change her mind."

"Very well then," said the frog, but he wasn't very pleased, Clare could tell. The frog dived back in the water. Clare and Max hung over the side of the pond, getting their clothes dirty after all, and they could see him through the murky water, tugging at the ball. It didn't want to come, and after a while the frog came popping up to the surface again and puffed a bit.

"It seems to have stuck. I'll have another go," he said, and they watched him dive down again. The Princess, who was sulking, at first wouldn't look, but after a while she got quite interested and she lay down on the moss beside Clare and Max and they all watched the frog as he tugged mightily at the ball. At last it came unstuck

and the frog pushed it up to the surface of the pond. It was covered in mud and slime and weeds and frog spawn, but the Princess snatched it up.

"My ball!" She wiped it in the moss. "Isn't it beautiful?"

It was indeed – bright gold and shining. Clare and Max crowded round to admire it, and the frog, who was sitting on a lily pad, said, "Ahem," in a meaningful way.

"Dear frog, thank you *so* much," said the Princess, graciously. "If you ever want me to bring you a bit of meat, or have my servants catch you a nice fly..."

"Oh no you don't," said the frog. "You have to take me home, to eat at your table and sleep on your pillow. You *promised* to do that."

"I did no such thing!" said the Princess.

"Yes you did," said Clare. "In the story you did."

"Yes, in the story you did," said Max.

"I told you, *I* never read any story. I think you're making it up," said the Princess. But then she saw she was trapped, and she said, "Oh, very well then. Come along. But *I'm* not going to carry you."

"I will," said Max, and he held out his hand for the frog. The frog hopped up onto his palm and Max put him in his pocket, with his peach stone. They went back to the castle in procession, the Princess in front with the golden ball and the plastic dinosaur, Clare in the middle, holding up her beautiful (now very muddy) skirt, and Max at the end, with the frog and the peach stone in his pocket.

When they got to the castle they found nearly everyone at the castle was on the lawns playing a game of cricket. Sitting on deck chairs beside the grass, were the King and Queen and Mr. Bingham. They were all drinking wine, and Mr. Bingham was telling a story. The King was roaring with laughter, but the Queen didn't seem to find it so funny. She jumped up when the procession arrived.

"Where have you *been*?" she said to the Princess. "I've been calling for you all morning."

Then she saw the state of their clothes.

"Good gracious me!" she said. "What *have* you been doing! You're all three *covered* in mud, just *covered*."

"We were trying to get my ball out of the pond," said the Princess. "It fell in."

"Well, we're going to have to get you out of those clothes immediately!" said the Queen, beginning to hustle them along. "Prince Gorgonzola is coming this afternoon to tea and he wants to meet you. You have to impress him you know, because he is a very rich and powerful Prince."

"But he's old, and fat, and horrible-looking," the Princess protested. "I can't marry *him*!"

"You have to marry somebody – Peregrine! – and he's just as good as anybody else – *Peregrine!* – and you didn't have any luck with the last one – PEREGRINE!" said the Queen. Peregrine came running up, panting.

"There you are at last," said the Queen. "Peregrine, take Max away and find him some clean clothes, something nice he can wear for tea. And send along a girl to help dress the Princess and Clare. They have to look extremely nice tonight – especially the Princess."

"I *won't* marry Prince Gorgonzola," said the Princess stomping off. Clare followed her. Max went with Peregrine.

"Shall I show you a secret?" Max said to Peregrine, as they ran along.

"Go on," said Peregrine.

Max opened his pocket and showed Peregrine the frog, nestling inside.

"It's very dry and stuffy in here," the frog complained. "I thought I was supposed to be eating at tables and sleeping on silken pillows, not being bumped about in little boy's pockets."

"Later, later," Max said, and shut his pocket again. "That's frog is a Prince in disguise," he explained to Peregrine. "He has to eat at the Princess' table and sleep on the Princess' pillow, and then he will turn into a Prince and marry the Princess."

"Ah," said Peregrine, wisely. "Does the Princess know this?"

"She won't believe me. Us," Max corrected himself.

"And do you think she will like the Prince the frog turns in to?" asked Peregrine.

"She should. It says in the story that she does," Max said. "Do you have any more peaches?"

"I don't have one single peach – and you ate all my plums," said Peregrine. "I'm afraid you will just have to wait until tea. But you know, I've just thought of something."

"What?" asked Max.

"*Any* Prince has to be nicer than Prince Gorgonzola," said Peregrine. "The Princess is right. He smells funny, and all his clothes have holes in. He's mean, even though he's so rich."

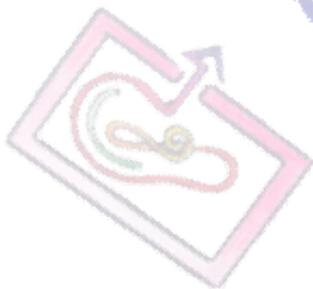
"So?" said Max.

"Well, I bet you Prince Gorgonzola doesn't like frogs," Peregrine said, thoughtfully.

"No, he doesn't sound like the sort of person who does," Max agreed. "Is that what you were thinking of?"

"I," said Peregrine, "Have a PLAN."

And he took Max by the wrist and began to hurry him along. Peregrine was so tall that Max's feet almost flew over the floor.



Chapter Three

Clare and the Princess went to a different part of the castle, where they were given baths and new dresses to wear.

"This is the loveliest dress I ever wore!" Clare said, floating round the bedroom. "This is nicer even than my bridesmaid's dress!"

"You can keep it if you want," said the Princess. "It's one of my old ones – I don't fit it, of course."

"Oh thank you," said Clare. She twirled around and the skirt blew out in a foamy circle. "Isn't it just *lovely*?"

"Lovely," said the Princess, in a dull voice. She sat down on the bed and slumped her shoulders.

"Dear Princess, what's wrong?" said Clare. She sat on the bed next to the Princess and put her arms around her neck. "Tell me if there is anything wrong."

"You're very sweet, Clare," the Princess said, beginning to cry. "But I'm afraid there is something very wrong. My mother the Queen wants me to marry Prince Gorgonzola and I *hate* him, I absolutely *hate* him. He's mean. He's fat. He smells terrible. I don't want to marry him and I'm going to have to!" She threw herself face down on the mattress and began to sob.

"Oh Princess! It can't be all that bad!" Clare said, kneeling beside her. "You don't *have* to marry him."

"Yes I do," the Princess sobbed. "I would much rather have married the Prince your Auntie married. Now if I don't marry Prince Gorgonzola I can't marry a Prince at all! We're all out of Princes!"

"You couldn't have wanted to marry Auntie Finn's Prince," said Clare. "He's very nice, but his mustache is much too long, and he's a bit droopy, don't you think?"

"Your Auntie Finn didn't seem to mind that," said the Princess, howling.

Clare had an idea. "What about the Frog Prince? If only you would believe in him!"

"I can't," wailed the Princess. "I *hate* frogs. And besides, with my luck, he'll turn out to be ugly, or in love with someone else."

Clare had to admit that that was true. She sat down where she was kneeling and thought and thought. The Princess cried a bit more until she was tired and then she got up and washed her face and said a spell and suddenly her face wasn't red or blotchy any more. At that moment, Clare heard trumpets outside and she ran to the window to look. There was a big hoo-ha going on outside, with pages and servants swarming everywhere, and a large chair that was carried by four men with shiny bald heads. The bald-headed men stopped the chair opposite the front door, which was below Clare's window, and immediately four trumpet players began to play.

"Come and look. It's so pretty!" Clare said. "I've never seen anything so pretty!"

"It's just old Gorgonzola," said the Princess, gloomily. "Nothing special. I've seen it all before."

"Oh," said Clare, but she didn't stop hanging out of the window to look. As she looked, the trumpet players stopped playing and a man stepped forward. He cleared his throat and shouted out in a loud voice, "Presenting his Royal Highness, Prince Gorgonzola!" The trumpets went da da de daaaaa! People started cheering.

"What's going on?" Max said to Peregrine, from where they were plotting, under the head table in the main hall.

"Oh, Prince Gorgonzola's arrived," Peregrine said, waving his hand. "Now, your Highness," he said to the frog, "Have you got it all?"

"Humph," said the frog. "It's not very original, is it?"

"Humph," said the Princess. "It's not very original, is it?"

Prince Gorgonzola was stepping out of his chair. Clare craned over the window to see. The Princess was exactly right. Prince Gorgonzola was enormous. He had fat red cheeks and thick black eyebrows, and a grumpy expression. He waddled up the steps on a red carpet to the great front door, and went inside. Clare lost sight of him. She turned back to the Princess.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll think of something. Now we had better go and meet him."

They went out into a long hall and down a sweeping staircase. Prince Gorgonzola was waiting there at the bottom with the King and the Queen. Mr. Bingham was standing in the crowd, looking rather out of place. Clare caught his eye and waved to him and he waved back and mouthed, "Where's Max?" but Clare didn't know. She shook her head at him.

"Princess!" said Prince Gorgonzola. He tried to bow, but he was too fat. "What a pleasure to meet you at last!" He turned to the queen. "She's just as beautiful as you said she was. In fact, she's *more* beautiful. She would make anyone a lovely bride!"

The Princess looked despairingly at her mother, but her mother motioned at her to curtsy, so she had to.

"Prince Gorgonzola!" she said, falsely. "How – how nice to meet you!"

"Shall we go in to dinner?" said the Queen, smiling.

Prince Gorgonzola grabbed the Princess' arm and walked with her. Clare followed, holding up her skirts. They all sat down at the high table together in stiff-backed chairs, the Princess with Prince Gorgonzola on one side and Clare on the other. Clare looked around for Max, and couldn't see him. Just then a very small waiter came up and offered the Princess some wine. Clare recognized the tuft of hair sticking up off his head. "Max!" she whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"It's our plan," Max whispered back, spilling some wine. "Here. This is to get rid of Prince Gorgonzola."

Clare held out her hand and felt something cold and a bit damp hop in to her cupped palm.

"Put it on the table between you. And if the King asks, tell him she *promised*," Max said. He went away.

Clare leant over to the Princess. "I think I know what he has in mind," she said. "Don't worry, it will be alright."

The Princess swallowed hard.

"Okay," she said. "Put him on now."

Clare opened her hand on the tablecloth and the frog jumped out. There was a gasp around the table. The frog hopped serenely over to the Princess' plate and began to help himself to a meal. Clare could see the King frowning over the table, her father looking horrified, Prince Gorgonzola's eyebrows going up and down.

"What *do* you think you're doing?" he said to the Princess.

"I'm giving the frog a meal," the Princess said, matter-of-factly.

"But this is a *banquet*. And that is a *frog*. Frogs are *disgusting*," said Prince Gorgonzola.

“Actually, they are quite nice,” said the Princess bravely, and she put her hand out and stroked the frog. Clare and the frog stopped eating, Clare because she was so astonished, and the frog because he liked it so much. He closed his eyes and sighed. The Princess was actually surprised at herself. She found she quite liked the feel of the frog’s skin – it wasn’t slimy at all. But the King leaned over the table.

“My daughter, what do you think you are *doing*?” he said, just like Prince Gorgonzola.

“I made a promise to the frog, father. In return for him fetching my golden ball out of the pool when I lost it this morning,” said the Princess.

“Ah, a promise,” said the King, and he sat back all pleased. “Good girl for keeping your promise.”

“She made a promise to a *frog*?” Prince Gorgonzola went on. “I can hardly *believe* it!”

He went on like that all the way through the meal. Clare thought he got quite boring. So, actually, did the King and Queen. And the Princess had thought he was boring from the start. She made a great show on liking the frog. She fed it and stroked it and even bent and kissed it on its head. The frog thought it was in heaven. When the meal was over, the Princess said goodnight to Prince Gorgonzola and scooped the frog into her hands and carried him away from the table. Clare followed her. They found Max eating off a big platter of left-overs in the kitchen, and Peregrine was with him, playing the guitar and singing a mournful sort of love song.

“Peregrine,” said the Princess, “I promote you to court musician! Now, Clare, and Max, you will spend the night, won’t you? I’ll ask to have two extra beds put in my room, and we can see what happens to this frog.”

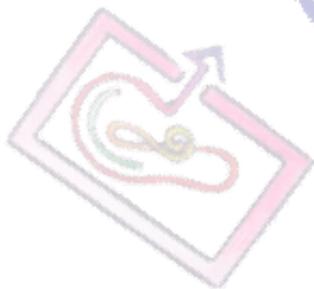
“We’d love to, but we’d have to ask our father,” said Clare.

“Peregrine can arrange that,” said the Princess.

“Yes, your Highness,” said Peregrine, and he went scurrying off looking for Mr. Bingham.

“Come on then,” said the Princess to Clare and Max. “Hurry up. This frog might become a Prince any minute. What are we waiting for?”

And she led the way back up to her bedroom.



Chapter Four

It was all arranged that Clare and Max would stay. Mr. Bingham said he would come back to collect them in the morning, and Clare and Max waved him off from one of the flag towers. They watched the car out of sight and then went back down the tower to find the Princess' bedroom in turmoil. Servants were pushing and heaving two great beds into the same room and colliding every now and then. In the middle, the Princess lay calmly on her own bed, and the frog lay on her pillow beside her.

"You know," she called out when she saw Clare and Max, "Your plan worked. I don't think Prince Gorgonzola wants to marry me – he left in a huff. And I don't think Mummy and Daddy want me to marry him either. He was so boring over dinner." She gave the frog a little loving stroke. "I could have told them that before," she added.

"Yipeee!" said Max.

"I'm so glad," said Clare.

"I'm so glad I could dance!" said the Princess. She kicked up her pretty feet and jumped off the bed on to the floor. "I think we should have some music. Call Peregrine!" she said.

Peregrine came with his guitar.

"Yes, your Highness?" he said.

"Can you play any jolly music?" asked the Princess.

"Of course, your Highness," said Peregrine. He sat on the stool at the end of the Princess' bed and started to play a lively little tune. The Princess grabbed Max with one hand and Clare with the other and began to skip round and round. They went on skipping round and round until they were sick and dizzy and laughing, and Peregrine played faster and faster until his fingers were a blur. At last the Princess let go of Clare and Max and she picked up the frog instead and did and dance with the frog. He said it made him feel a bit funny but he liked it. The Princess was very gentle with him and she put him back on the pillow and gave him a kiss. Immediately, the frog was gone.

"He's jumped away!" cried the Princess.

"No, he's turned in to a Prince!" shouted Clare. But they looked and looked and couldn't see any Princes. All they could see was Peregrine playing away with a big smile on his face.

"Where's the Prince gone – I mean the frog – I mean the Prince?" the Princess asked him. "He can't just have disappeared into nowhere!"

Peregrine looked over and winked at Max. Then he stretched lazily, put aside his guitar and got up. The Princess gave a little muffled squeak and Clare jumped up and down and clapped her hands together. Peregrine wasn't dressed as a servant any more – he was wearing a gorgeous princely costume, with blue tights and a blue-and-gold jacket, a flowing cloak and velvet boots. He knelt at the Princess' feet and kissed her hand.

"Dearest Princess," he said, "You have rescued me, Prince Peregrine, from a wicked enchantment, through your courage and kindness." He stood up and took her hands and looked down gently into her eyes and she suddenly burst into tears.

"Don't cry Princess," Clare said.

"Yes Princess, don't cry," said Max.

"You don't understand," cried the Princess. "This time I'm crying because I'm so happy!"

* * *

A long time later, Clare said, "But what happened about the frog?"

"That was a spell of the wicked witch, who put the enchantment on me in the first place. She said I was so awful that only a girl who could love a frog could love me."

"But what did you do that was so bad?" Clare wanted to know. "She must have been very angry to put an enchantment like *that* on you."

Prince Peregrine looked sideways at Max. "When I was a little boy I raided her orchid for plums and pears," he said. Then he suddenly jumped up.

"What..." began the Princess, but Prince Peregrine said suddenly, "Shhh!" and tiptoed to the door and put his ear against it. Clare and Max did the same. They could hear a frightful commotion coming down the hall, with lots of shouting.

"We had better investigate this," said Prince Peregrine, and he burst open the door and went in to the hall. The suddenly he shouted to the Princess, "Stay back!"

But it was too late. The Princess and Clare and Max had run out into the hall to see what was going on. Coming towards them were Prince Gorgonzola and the wicked witch. They were both very angry and they were striding along, ignoring the servants who were running after them and hanging on their arms to get them to stop. Prince Peregrine was shouting, "I'm going to find the Princess and I'm going to take her away and *marry* her!" and the witch was shouting, "I'm going to put a nasty spell on you *all!*"

Clare and Max were horrified and rooted to the spot. They had never seen a wicked witch before. She looked *very* wicked. She had pimples all over her chin and greasy, grey-green hair, and a black hat with holes in it. She was holding her broomstick over her head and occasionally shaking it, and now and then if a servant got too close she would whack them on the head.

"Get back in to the bedroom, *now!*" ordered Prince Peregrine, but nobody listened to him. The Princess said, "No, I'm going to stay and fight by your side!" Clare thought that that sounded very brave and she wished she was brave enough to say the same, but she was too afraid to even open her mouth. But Max tugged at the Prince's sleeve.

"Now *I* have a plan," he said.

Prince Peregrine and Max whispered at each other for a while, and then Prince Peregrine nodded. Max ran inside the bedroom and for a while Clare thought he was going to lock them out in the hall, but then he came running back, and Clare saw that he was holding the golden ball and the plastic dinosaur. She realized then what it was they were going to do. Prince Gorgonzola and the witch were so close now she could have reached out and touched them. But at that minute, Max bowled the ball at the witch and Prince Gorgonzola and it rolled under their feet and they went toppling over on top of each other like skittles. Prince Peregrine said a mighty spell – the Princess helped – and suddenly the plastic dinosaur wasn't plastic anymore. It was real, and it was about seven feet tall. It stood on its hind feet and gave the most almighty roar. Clare had never heard such a roar before. Her ears rang with it. It scared the witch and Prince Gorgonzola so much that they scrambled up off the floor and ran and ran and ran down the hall and down the stairs and out of the castle and far, far away. The dinosaur became plastic again and tumbled to the floor. And Clare ran and picked up the golden ball.

"I don't think we'll be seeing much of those two again," said Prince Peregrine.

"No, I don't think so," said the Princess. She took the golden ball from Clare's hand and then gave it back to Clare.

"Keep it," she said. "You deserve it, for all the help you've given us. I hope it will bring you luck as it brought me luck." Then she turned to Prince Peregrine. "I do believe this has been the luckiest day of my life," she said.

"I believe so," said Prince Peregrine. "There is only one thing left to do." He took her by the hand and they went down the hall and down the steps, to where the King and the Queen were bandaging up the servants who had been hit on the head with the witch's broomstick.

"Your Royal Highness," said Prince Peregrine, making a low bow. "I wish to marry your daughter."

"Prince Peregrine," said the King, "You are *more* than welcome," and he took the Prince and he kissed him on both cheeks.

The wedding was a week later. It was the second time in *two weeks* that Clare had been a bridesmaid. This time Max had been let-off being a page. He stood at the front of the church and smiled instead. And when it was time for the ring Prince Peregrine and the Princess looked round and round for the ring and couldn't find it at all. Max gave a great grin and pulled out the peach stone that he had been saving all along – and lo and behold, it had turned into a pair of golden wedding rings. So really, Clare thought, as Prince Peregrine kissed the Princess and everyone clapped, it was Max who saved the day – both times. She gave him a big sisterly smile and then her smile froze. Max's other pocket was definitely bulging. Definitely *moving*....

The wedding banquet was better than anything Clare had ever seen before. Mr. and Mrs. Bingham came and were shown round the castle. Aunty Finn and the Prince had managed to get back from honeymoon on time. There were seventeen courses at the banquet, and five of those courses were pudding. And there were jugglers that juggled on the table, musicians, who wandered around the banquet hall and sang sad songs for whoever would listen, and two conjurors. Clare thought she recognized them, and when she got close enough to see, she found that they were Prince Gorgonzola and the wicked witch, both dressed up in funny costumes and looking as mad as anything as they cast their spells.

After sitting and eating and looking for several hours even Clare thought she had had her fill of royal banquets. She looked around, expecting to see Max asleep somewhere. But instead she saw that some people were jumping out of their seats and the other end of the table. Some of the women jumped on chairs and held up their skirts. Some of the men were crawling about trying to catch something.

Then Clare saw the frog, hopping from plate to plate to plate along the table. After the frog came Max, crawling on the tablecloth and kneeling on plates and turning over flagons of wine.

"Max!" cried Mr. Bingham.

"Max!" cried Mrs. Bingham.

Prince Peregrine jumped up from the head table and came to help. Pretty soon the frog was safely back in Max's pocket, and people were clearing up the mess.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Mr. Bingham.

"I can't think what got into him," said Mrs. Bingham.

Prince Peregrine said, "Oh never mind, it was a bit of unexpected fun." He leant close to Max. "Tell me Max," he said. "Who is this one for?"

"I was saving it for Clare," Max said. "But I don't think this one is a Prince," he added sadly.

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Prince Peregrine. "Clare might not like a Prince just yet. And you never know. It might be a girl frog. A Princess for Max."

“Yeeuuch!” said Max, and Clare and her mother and her father and the Princess and Prince Peregrine all laughed.

The End

