



*“Once upon a time.”*

“Really mum, I’m not five you know.”

“I wish you were sometimes; you certainly act like it.”

Sighing heavily, I sink back on the bed and try to fight my frustration. They’ve only just arrived and my family are irritating me.

“Are you ok, Lily, love?”

My nan’s anxious face peers at me from the seat by the window because she needs an upright chair and she wouldn’t be able to get out of this bed if she got in. She’s accustomed to the orthopaedic one that appears to place her in a standing position and wash and dress her at the same time.

“I’m fine, just a little anxious.”

She looks concerned as mum rolls her eyes. “Which is precisely why I volunteered my story-telling services. Now, where was I?”

My friend Heidi nudges me and grins and I try to stem the slightly hysterical giggle that is threatening to send my mother over the edge.

As slumber parties go, this one is a little unusual. I am surrounded by my nearest and dearest who arrived earlier today for my wedding in the Chateau de Rêves, or in English, The Castle of Dreams. It’s where I live with my fiancé and have done for the past three years. We are converting it to a super luxury retreat and to say the progress is slow is an understatement.

Despite everything, I love it so hard it hurts. What was once a crumbling ruin on the verge of extinction, is now a potential Castle of Dreams as its name suggests. Finn and I love the place equally and gave up everything to see the dream reinstated from the nightmare it became. Yes, The Castle of Nightmares is its adopted new name, but I know it’s there. The romance is buried under the builder’s dust and the cobwebs of several generations of spiders. The drafty windows look over an amazing landscape that promises so much and delivers even more. The four turrets that stand proudly guarding the castle secrets are majestic and indicative of a time when life was very different and the huge open fireplaces in every room burn with a warmth that brings the life back to a forgotten paradise.

Once upon a time is not that far off the mark because I imagine this place was a fairy-tale castle when it was built and now mum has got a story to tell about something she discovered on google.

I am looking forward to hearing her story despite my interruption and look across with interest as she makes herself comfortable in the chair next to nan and smiles mysteriously.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...” She glares at me and I shrink a little in my seat as I revert back to that five-year-old girl who couldn’t get away with anything around her.

*“Once upon a time in a land far away and forgotten, stood a majestic castle. It was the jewel in the crown of a man who longed for the finer things in life. He had great wealth and used the castle to store it all. Word soon spread and people came from far and wide to catch a glimpse of a castle that was rumoured to be clad in gold bars. However, inside this castle of great wealth was a lonely man. He had everything that his money could buy him but one thing – love. He had nobody to share his passion with except for his servants, and he became bitter and jealous of other people’s happiness. Soon, he became consumed with a thirst for finding the last piece of a puzzle he was anxious to finish. He decreed that he would hold a ball in this very castle to find the woman he would marry.”*

“Oh, I’ve heard this one already.”

We look at nan in surprise and she shrugs. “Cinderella; it’s obvious. Honestly, Sonia, I’m surprised at your lack of originality.”

I smirk as mum bristles with indignation. “This is not Cinderella, far from it. You know, you’ve always been the same. Interrupting without knowing the facts first. Now, if you will just let me finish, you will see that this is definitely not Cinderella, or even remotely like it.”

Nan rolls her eyes making Heidi and me giggle and mum sighs. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“I do.”

Heidi’s hand shoots up and I snort. “We’re not in class, you know. What’s with the hand?”

“Just demonstrating my eagerness for a good old-fashioned tale.”

She grins and I can’t help but join her. Heidi always did make me laugh, which is why we are such good friends. Luckily, she could make the wedding because lately she’s always travelling with her boyfriend Thomas who she met under very romantic circumstances at a Ball we attended when she was actually dressed as Cinderella. You just couldn’t make it up!

Mum says crossly, “Anyway, no more interruptions, you’re disturbing my flow.”

“I can’t remember what a flow is. I need to go so often only a trickle comes out every time.”

Nan looks at us sadly. “Don’t get old dears, your body is way ahead of your mind and it’s quite a surprise when you realise you’re not that young woman with the world at her feet anymore. All you’re left with is a battered body that is failing on every level and a mind that still wants what it once had.”

Mum reaches across and squeezes her hand gently. “Don’t worry, Sandra, you’re in the castle of dreams now and who knows what will happen? Anyway, let me finish because I will need a cup of tea soon and the thought of walking down the millions of steps to get it, is not a happy one. You know, Lily, you really should consider tea and coffee making facilities in every room - just saying.”

Taking a deep breath, she carries on.

*“There was great excitement, as you can imagine. Word spread far and wide and it was all anyone could speak of. Every young girl in the land was hopeful of marrying the rich and handsome young man. The older women just wanted a peek inside a virtual palace and the men were interested in mixing with the many young ladies on offer. Yes, it was the gathering of the century and as you can imagine, no expense was too great for the wealthy young man. The day soon dawned and it was a glorious one. The sun beat down on a day filled with preparation and excitement. By the time the evening came, the castle was transformed into a fairy tale palace with food, drink and music bursting from every room and window. The people came and it was a splendid sight and they were met by the wealthy man who owned it. One by one, the women were presented to him, but they just didn’t appear to measure up. Something was missing until one in particular caught his eye. A beautiful girl in a white dress appeared and curtsied low before him. Flowers were woven into her hair that hung long down her back and the eyes that raised to his were as blue as cornflowers and sparkled with happiness. He caught his breath because this girl was as pure as the driven snow and appeared untouched by human hand. She could be an angel and from the moment her eyes met his, he knew she was the one. He couldn’t look away and reaching out, took her hand to help her to her feet as she bowed before him, and led her to the dance floor. As his arm encircled her waist, he resisted the urge to ask everyone to leave because he knew he had found the greatest treasure. As he spun her around the dance floor, he was so happy he thought his heart would burst.”*

“What were their names?”

“What?” Mum looks irritated as nan says loudly, “Their names. It’s all very well telling us about the wealthy handsome young man and the beautiful girl, but quite frankly, they could have terrible names. What were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you’re telling the story? Didn’t you google them?”

“If it did, I can’t remember, anyway, what difference does it make?”

“A lot. I mean, I can’t picture them unless they have a name.”

“I know.”

We turn and look at Heidi as she says with excitement, “Call them Finn and Lily. That would be so romantic and quite fitting considering why we’re here.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Mum looks worried and nan shakes her head. “Of course, I’m with Heidi on this. Yes, Finn and Lily are the heroes of this story, carry on.”

“No, I don’t think...”

“For goodness sake, Sonia, I’m the edge of needing another wee and won’t make it back if I have to leave. Finish your story and put me out of my misery.”

I flash mum a warning hard stare and she shrugs and carries on.

*“He never left her side all night. To say he was intoxicated with desire is an understatement. She was everything he was looking for and he couldn’t see past his own desire to have her.”*

“Now you’re talking.”

“Sandra, for goodness sake.”

“What, this is the good bit, carry on, Sonia”

Nan winks at me and I laugh softly as mum says wearily, *“He led her to a hidden staircase and promised to show her his greatest treasure.”*

This time we all burst out laughing and mum shouts, “Enough with the childish behaviour, I’m getting to the good bit.”

“You can say that again.” Nan grins and trying hard to stifle our laughter, we practice restraint as mum leans forward and lowers her voice.

*“He led um... Lily away from the party into the topmost turret where he stored his most valuable possessions and she had never seen such riches. She was blown away by um... Finn’s wealth and intoxicated on greed. He promised her his entire kingdom if she would be his bride and as he asked her to become his wife, she answered with words he didn’t want to hear. No.*

*He couldn’t believe it. He was offering her the world and she said no. He became enraged and demanded why and she told him fearfully that she was betrothed to another. A man that was cruel and vicious and the man nobody wanted to meet because he was known to kill a man just for the pleasure of hearing him scream Her parents had arranged the marriage and they were set to marry two weeks from the day. The only reason she came was to take one last lingering look at freedom before he locked her away forever. Well, um... Finn was enraged. He was so angry that his beloved Lily was betrothed to a beast and vowed he would do everything in his power to save her. She was frightened and begged him to let her go because the man...”*

“Bert.”

“We are not calling the evil man Bert.”

Heidi giggles as nan shrugs. “Why not, it amuses me?”

“Nan, you can’t liken grandad to a beast of a man who kills for pleasure. It’s not right.”

“Why not, it’s just for fun?”

Mum shakes her head and says wearily, *“Bert would seek revenge and they wouldn’t be safe. However, Finn couldn’t see past his own desire to own such a treasure and flew into a rage. He wouldn’t take no for an answer and locked Lily in the tower so she couldn’t escape. He made everyone leave and nobody knew what he had done. He thought no one would ever know and for the next two weeks she was his prisoner, only taking her food, water and washing facilities, telling her he was keeping her safe from a madman.”*

*Well, two weeks to the day, he was paid an unwelcome visit. Bert had discovered where Lily was and wanted his property back. It was his wedding day and he was in no mood to hang around, so with a huge army of men, he stormed the castle of dreams and left no stone unturned in his quest to find her. Finn was no match for the evil Bert and was cut down on the spot. His head was sliced cleanly off and Bert was rumoured to have grabbed it by the hair and carried it with him to find his errant bride. It didn’t take long and he soon ‘rescued’ her from the tower and presented her with the head of her erstwhile captor. Lily was overcome with grief and fear. She saw the madness in Bert’s eyes as he prepared to take what was his and so she did the only thing she could think of. She jumped from the window and fell to her death below. Bert’s roar of rage was heard throughout the land and as he held the head of the man who had taken his bride, he cursed the Castle of Dreams and vowed that no living soul would ever find happiness inside these walls. Then he plundered Finn’s wealth and murdered his staff and retreated back to his own palace of destruction. Legend has it that his curse remains to this day and only true love’s kiss will break it. When the curse lifts, it will reveal the location of the greatest treasure that remains hidden – the treasure of the castle of dreams that was never found and is thought to be buried somewhere nearby, waiting for the light of day to restore this place to its previous splendour.”*

There’s a stunned silence as she finishes and then nan says, “Typical Bert.”

We stare at her in amazement as she shrugs. “Probably some ancestor he forgot to tell me about.”

“Never mind grandad, what on earth possessed you to tell that tale a week before my wedding. Honestly mum, even for you this is a new low.”

Mum shrugs. “It’s only a story, ok, a legend, but it was years ago. As if things like that happen now.”

“According to you they do, all the time as it happens.”

Mum has an unhealthy obsession with murder most foul and this is right up her street.

Heidi interrupts, “I can see why you were reluctant to use Lily and Finn, hardly happy ever after, was it?”

We stare at each other gloomily and then mum says brightly, “Anyway, who fancies that cup of tea? I brought some digestives because I wasn’t sure if they did them in France. Come on Sandra, we can stop for a comfort break on the way.”

As they leave, Heidi throws me a sympathetic look and squeezes my arm. “Fairy tales were always so grim, weren’t they? Thank goodness the world became civilised and things like that would have serious repercussions these days. Maybe it’s best to look forward, not back. Now, I’ve got a bottle of gin in my room, do you fancy a sundowner?”

As I follow Heidi to her room, I try to push down any unease my mother’s story caused. Rubbish. Complete and utter rubbish and I will absolutely never think of that story again as long as I live.

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