

Return to the Kingdom of **The Nutcracker**

by J. K. Auberg

CHAPTER 1

When I was ten years old and just a hurt, scared, little girl something incredible happened to me that would change the course of my life. My father had disappeared a couple years ago. Before that, I was a happy, bright, young girl with big dreams and ambitions. I was always getting straight A's at school and involved in all sorts of extra curricular activities. I especially loved helping out at my dad's toy factory. All of that changed the night my dad disappeared. I fell into despair. I needed my dad. I wanted my dad with me. I missed him terribly. So, I withdrew into myself and my circle of friends dropped to just a couple, and those I barely paid much attention to. I guess I was blessed to have some friends who held onto me despite myself. I couldn't concentrate in school anymore, and my grades dropped to D's and F's. I was lost, and I didn't know how I could ever be found.

The night before my eleventh birthday, I found myself standing in the midst of a rainbow, candy cane paradise. It was the only place I ever knew any happiness, my escape from reality. My long, dark, wavy hair stood out sharply from the bright, almost nauseating, colors around me. I looked around in utter delight at the wonderland before me. I reached out and broke off a limb from a candy candy tree and put in my mouth. Delicious! This was an eleven year old girl's fantasy world with candy cane trees, rainbow waterfalls, delightfully fluffy clouds, and, of course, unicorns! A proud looking unicorn with a rainbow colored horn flew down and landed next to me. This was my unicorn. My five foot three body was dwarfed by the massive strength of the animal. The unicorn turned and smiled at me.

“Welcome back, Lucy!” it exclaimed with glee.

“Hello Lavender!” I replied.

“We haven't seen you here for quite awhile, Lucy.”

“Yeah,” I responded in my cute, light, little girl voice, “I just haven't been sleeping well lately.” It was true. There was too much going on in my life for a little girl to deal with.

“Well, I'm glad you're dreaming strong tonight! Climb aboard!”

I joyfully climbed onto the unicorn's back and we flew into the sunny blue sky while a rainbow shined brightly behind us. Together we did a loop de loop and passed through the puffy, white clouds. I reached out and grabbed a piece of the cloud, putting it in my

mouth. It made me smile; something I didn't do much of these days. It was cotton candy!

I was in a special place and yet, at the same time, I was asleep in my bed. I was in the place where children go in their dreams. It had been created a long, long, very long time ago by an angel who was assigned to protect children while they are dreaming. Nobody really knew what had happened to the angel, but there had been wars before. The nightmares were always banging just outside the realm, trying to spoil the beauty and innocence of the children's fantasies. I had heard the story about a time when the nightmare got in and took the form of a Rat King. An army of nutcrackers had to be made to stop them. You've probably heard about that one! Clara, from the Nutcracker tales, was my great, great grandmother, though I didn't know that at that time. She and the Nutcracker were legends here.

As my unicorn, Lavender, and I soared across the sickeningly colorful land I suddenly started to notice that the colors were fading. Then my unicorn started to feel weak and had to set down on the ground, which was now almost completely gray.

"What's happening?" spoke the unicorn raspingly as she faded from the imagination and disappeared. I suddenly found myself laying on the cold, hard ground!

"No!" I yelled in frustration. "This is my dream! Stop!"

It was no use, I no longer had control over my dream. Gradually, all the colors faded into blacks and grays. Just then, giant rats came running across the land in huge numbers. They had sharp teeth and growled low, lion like roars. One jumped right on to my face! I screamed!

"Ahhh!" I awoke suddenly and sat up in her bed. I was now wide awake and covered in sweat.

The door to her room burst open and my mom came charging in.

"Lucy! You okay?"

"Just a bad dream, I guess," I whined. "I want my dad!" I didn't mean to say it, it just came out. I know it hurt mom just a little every time I brought him up.

"You're drenched in sweat and you're shaking," my mom pulled me into a hug. "I would call that more than just a bad dream."

"I don't know what happened," I whined. "I was having a wonderful dream with my unicorn, Lavender, when suddenly everything faded to gray and I was attacked by giant viscous rats!"

"Okay. Everything's fine now. Let's get you cleaned up and back to bed." Her voice quivered a little.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to."

"I know honey," she replied. "I know. It's hard, but we will get through this."

After a quick bath I returned to my bed and went back to sleep. For the rest of the night I slept restlessly, without returning to my dream world. In the morning I awoke feeling groggy and dazed. At first I thought maybe I would just stay in bed for awhile, but I could hear my mom yelling for me to get up. I stumbled out of my bed and into the bathroom. Then I struggled out of my night clothes, barely managing to get my blue and

white sun dress on. It would have been one of my favorite outfits if I had cared to have a favorite anything.

I stumbled down the stairs where my mom was waiting for me at the breakfast table. The news was playing on the TV sitting on the counter across from the table. The table was an old wooden square that had several cracks in it. As I approached it, I noticed all too well how well it seemed to fit in with the crumbling dry wall in the kitchen. In fact, the entire house was in a general state of disrepair. I sat down with my mother at the table and stared at the small bowl of dry cereal.

“Sorry sweetie,” spoke my mother, “that's all there is. We used up the last of the milk at dinner last night.”

“Are we going to be okay, mom?” I asked.

“Don't you worry about such things,” my mother replied. “I'm starting at the new grocery store tomorrow. It won't bring much, but it'll help us keep food on the table. Now, forget such things; it's your birthday. Let's make the most of it.”

“Okay,” I whined.

Just then a report came on the news that caught my mom's attention. She turned up the volume.

“Nightmares are on the rise,” said the reporter on the TV. “There has been a very unusual number of kids having the same nightmares again and again. These nightmares seem to involve the kids being attacked by large, viscous rats. Doctors and psychiatrists are at a complete loss to explain the occurrences of such consistent nightmares by so many different children...”

“That sounds just like the nightmare you had last night,” my mom suggested.

“It does,” I mumbled. “How strange.”

The two of us ate our dry cereal and drank our glasses of water (we didn't have orange juice left, either). I sat hunched over, the bangs of my hair hanging over my eyes a little. I sighed. When breakfast was finished, my mom went into the other room and brought out a small gift-wrapped box.

“Mom, what's going to happen to our toy factory?” I asked as she came back into the room.

“Oh sweetie!” she exclaimed. “Try not to think about such things. It's your birthday. Enjoy it. There will be plenty of other days for us to worry about the future of your dad's business.”

The toy factory, which included a toy store, had been my dad's pride and joy. He had been one of the best toy makers in the whole country. In fact, his toys had been sought after world wide, but now he was just a legend. Nobody knew where he was or what happened to him. A few years ago, he had started acting paranoid and then just down right crazy. He kept telling my mom that someone or something was after him. Then he began talking about a Rat King that was out for revenge. Mom tried to get him help, but he wouldn't go to the doctors. Then one day he just disappeared, never to be seen again. Mom and I tried to keep the factory running, but the new toys we made just weren't the same. Even though we had followed all the designs he had made, there was just

something different about them. They didn't sell. When all the old stock was sold out people stopped coming to the Toy Store and businesses stopped ordering from the factory. Nobody wanted the new toys, and so now everything was falling apart. There was no more money and slowly age took its toll on the house, the store, and the factory. Peeling paint, cracked walls, and stained floors were now the prominent features of the buildings. It looked on the outside like I felt on the inside; falling apart.

My mom came back into the room carrying the small package. "Happy 11th Birthday baby girl!" She handed me the tiny, wrapped box. "Of course, you'll get most of your presents tonight at your birthday party, but this one is special..." She choked up a little. "It's from your dad... he had it for a long time... he always said that he wanted you to have it when you turned 11. I don't know why or even what it is."

"Well, let's find out," I exclaimed, a little teary eyed. It was the first time in a long time that I actually felt a little excited. After all, my dad hadn't been in my life for several years.

Gently I tore the wrapping paper off of the package to reveal a small wooden box with intricate carvings of flowers on it. With a little force I managed to get the lid off. I reached my little hand into it and pulled out a key.

Mother's eyes lit up. This wasn't just any key; it was a very special key of indescribable beauty. No doubt my father had made it himself a long time ago. It had a rather intricate set of key teeth that led up to a detailed carved handle. The handle took the shape of a beautiful carousel complete with tiny little horses, elephants, and giraffes on it. Above all, it was a gorgeous, one of a kind work of art.

After inspecting it with awe, I looked to mother and asked, "What's it go to?"

"I'm sorry honey," she replied, "I have no idea. I've actually never seen it before."

"Oh," I replied, disappointed. "Well, it's very pretty."

"That it is."

Just then the phone rang. It was an old wall phone that almost fell off the wall from the vibrations of the ring. My mom picked it up.

"Hello," she said into the phone. "Yes, this is Mrs. Licordia... Oh... uh... well, it's my daughter's birthday... okay... very well."

She hung up the phone looking quite discontent. "I'm sorry Lucy. Somebody called out sick at the new grocery store and I have to start the new job today."

"That's okay, mom," I replied with an air of disappointment in my voice. I tried to hide it, but it came through anyways. "We'll celebrate when you get home tonight."

"Thanks sweetie. Let me see if Joan can come over and watch you."

"Mom, I'm eleven now! I don't need a sitter."

"Well, I don't know about that," replied my mother, "but I've got to go, so we'll try it for today. The number to the store is on the fridge; call me if there are any problems. I'll be back at 7pm. Your birthday guests should be arriving around that time... I'm so sorry to leave you on your birth..."

"It's okay mom. I'll be alright." Kind of a lie. I didn't think I would ever be alright ever again, but whether or not I had a babysitter wasn't going to change any of that.

Mom soon left to go to her new job, still rather concerned that she had to leave her daughter alone on her birthday. She was still trying to run the toy factory and store, but it wasn't making any money. If we were going to keep eating she was going to have to work a part time job.

CHAPTER 2

Now I was alone in my dilapidated, old house. For a moment my usual sulking self sat lifeless slouched over on the couch watching TV, but suddenly I sat up. Suddenly I felt a need... a purpose. I set myself on a mission. With the key in my hand, the very special key that held a link to my missing father, I began checking doors. I went to the kitchen first and tried the lock on the pantry door. It didn't fit. Then I went to the china cabinet in the dining room. The key didn't work on that either. Next I tried the back door, front door, and garage door. Nothing.

I sat on the floor and cried for a minute, and then pulled myself back up. Determined, I climbed the creaky stairs of my home and began checking every door on the second floor. I became anxious and eager. I went from bedroom to bedroom and tried the key in every door and lock I could find. Still nothing. Frustrated, I sat down and cry again. A couple minutes passed. Wait! Were there any other locks in the house? No, there wasn't. What could the key go to? What about the factory?

My house was connected to the factory and I could get there through the garage. Excited about my new idea, I ran down the steps, nearly falling, and bolted into the garage. I was an emotional wreck as I bounced up the steps to the factory door. It was locked. I pulled out my special key and stuck in the lock. It fit. Unfortunately it wouldn't turn. I yanked it back out and headed back into the house. Tears streamed down my eyes as I went into the kitchen. In the kitchen pantry I desperately went through the keys that hung on the back of the door and found the one to the factory. With the factory key in my one hand I wiped away my tears with the other and galloped back into the garage to unlocked the factory door. In the factory there were hundreds of doors to try my special key on. With almost obsessive determination, I planned out my action. Systematically I began going from door to door, inspecting each lock. Hour after hour I went from door to door. I cried, wiped away tears, and moved on. Door after door I rattled the key, but none of them opened. Exhausted, I collapsed on the floor in a heap. Broken and frustrated I just wailed.

Suddenly I was startled by a knocking on the factory's main door. I looked up slowly and wiped the tears out of my eyes pushed my hair back. There was another knock. Cautiously I walked over to the door and looked out. There was a boy about my age outside. I decided to open the door.

"Uh, can I help you?" I asked the young boy, my voice still kind of cracking from the crying I'd been doing.

"Hi," replied the boy. "I saw you going from door to door through the window. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to figure out what this key my father gave me goes to." I showed him the key.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "That key is an incredible piece of art."

"I know! Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Actually," replied the boy. "I have, but it's still an awesome key."

I was rather surprised that he seemed to think he'd seen something like it before. "I just can't figure out what it goes to!" I exclaimed in frustration.

"Why don't you just ask your dad?"

"I haven't seen my dad for several year." I choked back my tears. "Actually, nobody has."

"Oh," the boy paused. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay." It really wasn't.

"My name's Henry. My father and I just moved in down the street."

"Hi Henry. I'm Lucy."

"You know, Lucy, my dad is a skilled craftsman. He has made keys very similar to yours. He might be able tell something about it."

"Cool!" I perked up a little. "What time is it?"

"It's five thirty."

"Okay. Let's go! I have to be back before seven."

I made sure to lock up the factory, and then I followed Henry to his dad's house down the street. Excitement bubbled up inside me once again. Just maybe I would find out what the key was for. This is really the moment it started; little did I know that this simple moment was going to be the beginning of a great adventure that would change everything.

Henry's home was more of a small workshop than a house. As I entered I was enthralled by the shelves and shelves of high quality hand made toys. Blocks of wood, sheet metal, and gears, pulleys, and more gears covered the work benches. In the far corner of the room, working carefully on engraving the wood of a particularly beautiful mini toy carousel, sat Drosselmeyer. He looked up for his work and stared at the two kids approaching him. I was shocked when I saw his face. My heart nearly leapt out of my body. At one point he had been like a second father to me.

"Drosselmeyer!" I exclaimed excitedly and ran over to him. Once again tears streaked my eyes. I guess I cried a lot in those days.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" spoke Drosselmeyer as he took me into his embrace. "I'll be! If it isn't Lucy Licordia!"

"You two already know each other?" said a surprised Henry.

"Yes, Henry," replied Drosselmeyer. "Before I moved back to Russia, I used to be Lucy's father's business partner. Oh, Lucy, sweetie, I'm so sorry to hear about your dad's disappearance."

"Thank you Mr. Drosselmeyer," I replied with tired, cracked voice. "Uhm, well.. you see... I..."

"Dad," Henry took over for me as I was tongue tied, "Lucy has a special key her father gave to her."

I handed the key over to Drosselmeyer. He took in his hand and studied.

"I've tried every door in the house and the factory," I whined to him through my tears. "It doesn't fit anything."

"Interesting," replied Drosselmeyer. He studied the key carefully for a few

moments. "Yes. I know this key."

"You do!" exclaimed both Henry and I in unison.

"Yes," Drosselmeyer laughed. "In fact I made this key."

"You did?" I felt new life enter me. Anticipation filled my senses. Finally I was getting answers. "Please tell me. What door does it go to?"

"Well you see, Lucy," began Drosselmeyer, "not all keys go to doors."

"A car?" asked Henry.

Drosselmeyer laughed again. "No. This key goes to a toy. A toy, that like you Lucy, is lost. When you find it you will find yourself."

"What?" I asked. How did Drosselmeyer even know I was lost?

"It goes to a very special wind-up carousel. A masterpiece unlike any other toy I've ever made. Your dad ordered it years ago. Said he was going to give it to you on your eleventh birthday..."

"Yep," I replied. "That's today. Mom gave me the key this morning."

"But where's the toy carousel?" added Henry.

"Oh," I became exceedingly sad. I choked out the words, "Everything that dad ever made was sold to keep the business going." I sighed. I would not be finding where the key goes. "It's gone."

"Cheer up baby girl," replied Drosselmeyer. "It's not gone. I told you, it's just missing. You see, your dad had a secret room where he kept his most precious toys. The creations that were so great that he couldn't sell them. The carousel would be in that room."

"But where is this secret room?" I whined. I was now totally and completely emotionally exhausted.

"Don't worry, sweetie," replied Drosselmeyer. "Your mom will know."

"Really?"

"Yes. She knows."

"Thank you Mr. Drosselmeyer." I hugged the old family friend and then Henry and I headed back to my home. I invited Henry to join me at my birthday party.

We arrived at my house just minutes before the first guests arrived. The doorbell rang and I answered it.

"Hi Jenny!" I said to my first guest and her mother. "Hello, Mrs. Holly."

"Hi Lucy," replied Jenny. Jenny was my best friend. Despite everything she was always there for me.

"Lucy," began Mrs. Holly, "listen, I hope you don't mind. We brought a couple of trays of boneless chicken wings for the party."

"That's so sweet!" I exclaimed. "Of course I don't mind. Come on in. My mom had to work, but she should be home any minute now."

One by one each of the kids in my class arrived at the party with their mothers, or occasionally, their father. Even though they weren't asked to, each family brought food. There was way more than would ever be eaten at the party. They knew things were tough for mom and I and they wanted to make sure there would be plenty of left overs to

last for several days. Shortly after the last guest arrived, the phone rang. I looked over at the clock. It was three minutes after seven. My heart sank. It had to be mom. I picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

“Hi Luce.” As I suspected, it was my mother. She sounded frazzled. “Listen Luce... I'm so sorry... Mr. Stevenson needs me to stay at the store a couple more hours. I told him I had to get to your birthday, but he said if I want to keep this job I had to stay.”

“Okay,” I replied, trying not to sound disappointed. My eyes teared again.

“Ask Jennifer's mom to chaperon,” continued my mom. “I'm sure she won't mind. Again I'm...” another voice was heard in the background, “hey, I don't pay you to talk on the phone!” and the phone hung up.

“Listen up everyone!” I shouted over all the talking, my voice cracking with my tears.. The room became quiet pretty quickly. “My mom has to work later so she won't be able to make it. She's asked you, Mrs. Holly, to chaperon if you would...”

“Of course, honey. No problem,” replied Jennifer's mom.

“Now hold on just a minute!” Thomas' father raised his voice. “Your mom is working that new grocery store, right?”

“Yes,” I replied, choking back my sadness.

“That jerk!” said Thomas' father, quickly followed by, “sorry.” He picked up his cell phone and dialed a number. “Hello,” pause. “Can I speak to Ted Lolta?” pause. “Hi Ted, it's John Handyson from the bank,” pause. “You want that loan you asked for, right?” pause. “Yea, well, I'm at birthday party for Mrs. Licordia's daughter and she's not,” pause. “I don't care. You should have scheduled accordingly. She was supposed to get off before 7pm,” pause. “Again, I don't care. You're taking advantage of that poor lady. If she's not at this party in ten minutes, you can kiss that loan goodbye,” pause. “Good day.”

John Handyson ended the call and turned to face me, “your mom will be home in ten minutes.”

“Thank you Mr Handyson,” I replied. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” replied John. “Ted knew your mom needed to be home for your birthday and he kept her there anyways. It just wasn't right.”

John Handyson wasn't what you would have expected the president of a bank to be. Some might say he was kind, but I thought the word “kind” seemed to be quite inadequate. John had a heart of gold and had managed to get himself into a position where he could really use that heart of gold to do some good in this world. I knew that he was the reason that we still had the factory. The bank would have foreclosed on it years ago if it weren't for John.

Eight minutes later my mom finally walked in the door and greeted everyone. I rushed into her arms.

“Oh sweetie!” she exclaimed and held me tight.

After she released me, I immediately brought Henry over to her.

“Hey mom,” I said, “this is Henry. He and his dad just moved in down the street.”

“Well, hello there Henry. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Oh,” I continued, “and his dad is Drosselmeyer.”

Mom paused for a moment. “Really? Drosselmeyer is here?”

“Yes,” replied Henry. “He’ll be wanting to meet with you when it’s convenient.”

“Of course!” responded my mom. “I would be honored to meet with him again.”

Then the party started and for a short moment I forgot that I was sad, I forgot that I was lost, and I was just a little girl enjoying her birthday party. We all played games, ate tons of food, opened gifts, had cake, and watched a movie. It was a wonderful birthday party. Of course, time flies when you’re having fun, and soon it was time for everyone to go to leave.

“Thank you for all the food and gifts!” exclaimed my mom and I as the guests left.

“Think nothing of it,” replied Mrs. Holly. “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask us. We’re not just your neighbors, we’re your friends.”

When all the guests were out of the house, I walked eagerly up to my mom.

“What is it, honey?” my mom asked. “I haven’t seen you eager to do anything in a long time.”

“Is there a secret room?”

“A secret room?” she repeated.

“Yes,” I replied insistently. “A room where dad kept his most favorite toys.”

“Why?” Now mom seemed a little suspicious.

I pulled out the special key that she had been given me earlier that morning.

“Drosselmeyer said that it goes to a special carousel that dad had him make for me a long time ago. He said it would be in dad’s secret room.”

“After your dad disappeared,” my mom started, “well, I was concerned. I knew that finances were going to get tough... I was afraid...”

“You were afraid?”

“I was afraid that I would sell those special toys if things got too desperate... so I had the door plastered over so that I would forget about it.”

“Did you?” I asked.

Pause. “No. Not a day has gone by where I haven’t thought about your father and his wonderful creations.”

“Is there a way in?”

“Tomorrow we’ll get someone to come and break out the plaster, but for tonight it’s time you got to bed. Hope you had a good birthday. Sorry I had to work through most of it.”

“It’s okay mom. I know you’re doing what you have to keep us going. And mom...”

“Yes sweetie?”

“I did. I did have a wonderful birthday.” I teared a little, but this time they were happy tears. “Thank you.”

My mom tucked me in and kissed me on the forehead.

“Good night, Luce.”

“Good night mom.”

She turned out the light and I shut my eyes. All the emotions I felt that day and all the searching had left me utterly exhausted and so I very quickly fell asleep.

CHAPTER 3

Soon I found myself back in the dream realm, except now the colors seemed dull and faded. Then a loud pounding of feet startled me as a regiment of nutcrackers came charging past.

“You can't stay here, lass,” said one of the nutcrackers. “We're on retreat and the rats will be coming up the hill any moment.”

“What?” I was confused.

He put his hand out. “Get on my stead. You can ride with me.” I grabbed hold of his hand and he hoisted me up, almost effortlessly, onto the back of his horse. Then we galloped off to join the rest of the retreating nutcrackers.

As I sat behind the nutcracker, I couldn't help but notice that he had cracks in his wood and the paint was scratched all over his body. His left leg was badly splintered and there was a hole in his side.

“You're hurt,” I said.

“Don't worry, lass,” replied the Nutcracker. “I'll be okay. The fortress is just over the next hill. We'll all be safe there.”

It was then that I made the mistake of turning my head and looking behind. Thousands of large rats covered the landscape behind them. They were the largest, ugliest, most ferocious rats I had ever seen, and despite the speed of the nutcracker's horse the rats were gaining on us.

“There getting close!” I yelled out.

“Just hang on!” replied the nutcracker. “We're almost there!”

We reached the top of the hill and a large fort came into view. The nutcracker urged the horse to go faster. The rats were right behind us, practically biting the heels of the horse. The nutcracker and I charged forward into the fortress doors, which were promptly slammed shut after us. The rats crashed into the door in piles. Several nutcrackers took up positions on the wall and began firing down at the rodents, who quickly realized that they were sitting ducks outside the fortress and retreated.

“Enemy is on the retreat,” announced one of the nutcrackers. Cheers broke out from around the fort.

The nutcracker whose horse I was on gently lowered me to the ground. “What's your name?” he asked me.

“My name's Lucy.”

“I am Nutcracker Jonathan. Who is your dream guide?” continued the nutcracker.

“My what?” I replied.

“A dream guide is usually an animal, but could be something else. The dream guide greets you when you enter the Kingdom of the Nutcracker and guides you through your dream.”

“Kingdom of the Nutcracker?” I asked.

“The Kingdom of the Nutcracker is where we are right now, though it wasn't always called that. It is the special place that exists in the dreams of children like you; a place

that is as real as it is imaginary.”

“Huh?”

“You may wonder if this place actually exists or if it is just a place in your dreams...”

“Oh, I’m dreaming,” I realized.

“There is no clear answer,” he continued. “This place exists as equally as much as it does not exist. Children visit here often in their dreams, but adults, adults never visit. Well, except for that one... It is here that toys come to life through the imagination of children and they take on the personalities of those children, but not all children play nice. A long time ago the imaginations of mean and rotten kids had taken over and ravaged the beauty of this world. The evil imaginings had primarily taken the form of large human-like rats, led by a malicious Rat King. For the good kids of the world this wonderful world of dreams became a terror of nightmares. During this time, it was common for kids in the real world to wake up screaming, sometimes with mysterious bruises, scratches, and bites on them!”

“That’s happening now!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” continued the nutcracker, “history is repeating itself. No doubt, they are out for revenge.”

“How did you stop them last time?”

“There was an adult named Drosselmeyer...”

“Drosselmeyer?” I interrupted. “I know him.”

“You do?” said the nutcracker. “Well, you are a special one, aren’t you. Drosselmeyer was the only adult to ever enter this dream realm. How? Nobody seems to know. He was a very caring and loving man who loved all the children of the world... and not in a creepy way as he is sometimes depicted...”

“Huh?” I interrupted again, not having an clue what he was talking about.

“Never mind that,” continued the nutcracker. “Drosselmeyer knew the naughty children in the dream world needed discipline, so he built an army of nutcrackers - that would be us - in the real world and gave them to kids that he knew would use them properly in the dream world. In those days, Drosselmeyer, himself, often fought side by side with us. Although we nutcrackers made some progress in fighting back the rats, we lacked cooperation and organization. Drosselmeyer realized that we needed leadership, so he made a very special nutcracker, The Nutcracker, to be a captain to lead us to victory. The Nutcracker was unlike any other toy Drosselmeyer or anyone else had ever made! Somehow Drosselmeyer had given it its own life. It didn’t need a child’s imagination to exist in the dream world; it had a personality and existence all of its own! With The Nutcracker’s leadership the evil rats were contained and the Rat King was largely subdued...”

“Wait!” I exclaimed, “this sounds like the plot to the ballet.”

“Yes,” replied the nutcracker, “though not entirely accurate, the ballet ‘The Nutcracker’ does tell the story of that great war. After the war was over, we, the nutcrackers, maintained the security of the dream world, keeping the evil imaginations at bay. Ever since then, this world between imagination and reality has been known as the

Kingdom of the Nutcracker.”

“Okay,” I said as I tried to take in all the information. “So, what happened? Why are the rats back?”

“Well, as I said, The Nutcracker was different. He didn't need a child's imagination to exist. The girl from 'The Nutcracker' ballet, Clara, captured the heart of The Nutcracker causing something miraculous to happen. After defeating the Rat King, The Nutcracker crossed over to the real world and became a living boy. He and Clara grew up together and were eventually married. They had a couple children, who married and had children of their own. One of those children married a beautiful American girl and traveled with her to the United States where they produced one child of their own, a girl who never knew that her great, great grandfather had started out life as a toy.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I wonder who she is?”

“Anyhow,” continued the nutcracker, “without the leadership of our captain we nutcrackers eventually became disorganized. Even with a new leader, we failed to stop the evil kids and their imaginations. Our only hope is to find the great, great, granddaughter of Clara. Once The Nutcracker saved the girl. Now, it is time for the girl to save The Nutcracker.”

“Oh,” I didn't know how to respond.

“So, who is your dream guide?” asked the Nutcracker again. “Who usually meets you when you come here?”

“That would be my unicorn, Lavender.”

The nutcracker turned his attention to another nutcracker, “Nutcracker Richard.”

“Yes sir,” replied the other nutcracker.

“Get me a location and status on a unicorn named Lavender. She's this child's dream guide.”

Nutcracker Richard disappeared for about two minutes and then returned.

“Dream Guide Lavender located,” reported Nutcracker Richard. “She is reported to be in good health and is only a short distance from here.”

“Send for her at once,” ordered Nutcracker Jonathan.

“Yes sir.”

“In the meantime you can have a seat here, Lucy,” the nutcracker pointed to a bench that was up against the wall. “I have to report in. I will be back shortly.”

“Okay,” I answered as I sat down on the cold, hard bench. While I was waiting I pondered all the things that I'd just been told and tried to make sense of it all.

A short time later Lavender, my unicorn, came marching down the hall. When she saw me she went ecstatic.

“She sitting on a hard bench?” Lavender exclaimed. “Don't you know who she is? You can do better than this!”

“She's Lucy?” replied Nutcracker Jonathan. A truer statement could not be said. I was Lucy.

“Yes, she's Lucy!” yelled the unicorn. “Princess Lucy, the great, great, granddaughter of Clara.”

“Clara!” the nutcrackers all exclaimed.

“Sorry,” replied Nutcracker Jonathan. “I didn't know.”

“Clara?” I asked, “like from the ballet?”

“Yes Lucy,” answered Lavender. “You are the descendant of the original princess of The Kingdom of the Nutcracker.”

“You can help us,” added Nutcracker Jonathan.

“I can,” I replied. “How?”

“There is a special key,” answered Lavender. “You must find it.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key given to me by my father. “This key?”

The nutcrackers responded with oohs and aahs and general amazement as if they were shown the most valuable thing in the universe.

“She has the key!” exclaimed one of them.

“We're saved!” shouted another.

“Hold on now!” yelled Lavender, the unicorn. “The key is not really here.”

The nutcrackers became silent with disappointment.

“It's not?” I responded with confusion.

“No,” answered Lavender. “Just as you are not really here. Remember, for you, this is a dream, and the key is just part of that dream.”

“What must we do?” asked Nutcracker Jonathan.

“You and the rest of the nutcrackers can do nothing right now,” replied Lavender.

“Lucy must find the portal and bring the key here without dreaming.”

“I can come here without dreaming?” I asked.

“Yes,” continued Lavender. “Drosselmeyer created a special portal that allows people to enter the dreamland outside of their dreams.”

“Where is it?” I inquired.

“A word of caution first,” Lavender paused. “Understand that this is dangerous. When you are here in your dreams there is very little harm that can actually come to you, but if you enter outside of your dream, you will actually be here. That means that you can be hurt and even killed just like in the real world. We need you, but you must not enter without understanding the threat. The Rat King and his followers will hunt you down and try to stop you. You will be vulnerable. In fact, I fear that we can not allow you to take this risk...”

“I must,” I interrupted. “You said I was your only hope.” It was very uncharacteristic of me to say such thing in those days, but this was a dream and I was feeling brave in that dream.

“We will do all we can to protect you,” added Nutcracker Jonathan, “but still, the choice, and the risk, is yours. We do need you, but we do not want harm to come to you.”

“And now,” said Lavender, “it's time for you to wake up.”

“Wait!” I screamed. “Where is the portal?”

“The portal is the toy that...”

I awoke, disappointed that I didn't get the full answer. Sitting up, I pondered for a moment, but it all quickly faded away as dreams do. A moment later my mom walked into her room.

"Hey sleepy head," she said. "You overslept. Breakfast is waiting for you."

"Oh," I replied as I stretched.

"Drosselmeyer and Henry will be over in an hour. They're going to help us get into your dad's secret room."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm glad to hear you sound excited. It's been too long since you've got excited about anything."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, honey," she replied. "I've just been worried about you."

Knowing that I would soon get into my dad's secret room cheered me up greatly. I would soon have the special thing that the key went to; the special thing that my dad had wanted me to have. I quickly threw off my pajamas and slipped on some dark blue leggings and a light blue dress. I hurried down the steps and ate my breakfast. There was lots of food left over from last night's party. Then I anxiously awaited the arrival of my friends.

After what seemed an eternity, but was actually ten minutes, the doorbell rang. I jumped up and rushed over to answer it.

"Well, someone's excited," my mother commented.

I opened the door and invited Drosselmeyer and Henry in.

"Hello Lucy," said Drosselmeyer. "It's good to see you again and sounding so cheerful too."

"Hello," I replied. "Hi Henry."

"Hi Lucy," said Henry.

"Welcome Drosselmeyer," said my mom.

"Oh, Mrs. Licordia," responded Drosselmeyer. "It's good to see you again."

"Please, call me Stephanie," mom replied.

"Well, Stephanie," continued Drosselmeyer, "I think I can help with the toys; you know, get the factory running again with toys that will actually sell."

"That would be great, Drosselmeyer," replied my mother.

"But first, I believe there's a certain young lady who is eager to get into her dad's secret room."

"That there is!" I exclaimed.

"Come on," said Drosselmeyer as they went up the steps to reach the spot where the door to the room had been plastered over.

He led us up the stairs and down the left hall and stopped at a large painting. The painting took up the entire wall from floor to ceiling, it had an exquisite frame with detailed carvings of horses set in gold or possibly bronze. The painting itself was of a carousel in the middle of a city park. It had tremendous detail and beauty. I could see every animal that a child sat upon on the carousel, and I could almost feel it turning

around and around. Of course, it did not, as it was just a painting. I pulled out my key and held up before the painting.

“It's the same carousel!” I exclaimed.

“Of course it is,” replied Drosselmeyer. “Of course it is.”

He helped my mother lift the painting off the wall and set it down a short ways away in the hallway. Drosselmeyer then pulled out of his tool bag an odd shaped contraption, the likes of which I'd never seen before.

“Stand back,” he commanded us and so we did.

With the press of a button a light came forth from the contraption and shined in red upon the wall. Drosselmeyer fiddled with a couple dials and buttons on the machine and the light adjusted to a rectangular shape. The contraption hummed and the light changed to blue. Just then I could swear that I could see the hidden door through the wall. Suddenly the light became incredibly bright, so much so that I had to cover my eyes. When it dissipated I opened my eyes and to my amazement the dry wall was now gone. Before us stood a very handsome, carved, wooden door.

“What was that machine?” asked my mother.

“Nothing you need bother yourself thinking about,” replied Drosselmeyer. “Just a little invention of mine. Now, I know the kids are eager to explore your husband's special room, so let's leave them to it. You and I should go downstairs and discuss how to revitalize the toy factory.”

“Very well,” replied my mother. She then looked at me, “let me know what you find.”

“Now Lucy,” added Drosselmeyer, “listen carefully. When you wind the carousel, you must be certain you immediately put the key back into your pocket. Henry, be sure to stay close to her.”

“Why?” I asked. His directions were strange and seemed pointless.

“No,” he reply. “No 'why,' just do as I say. Just make sure the key is on you when the carousel starts spinning.”

“Okay,” I replied, still rather confused about why that would matter.

Then my mother and Drosselmeyer headed downstairs to discuss business. During that time Drosselmeyer would examine the toys we had made with my dad's blueprints and tell my mother why they didn't sell. It turns out the difference between our toys and dad's was personality. Dad's toys apparently all had their own slight differences, differences that gave each toy its own personality. We had followed everything exact and so our toys were all exactly the same, and apparently, lacked personality. Drosselmeyer offered to work in the factory for a period time and teach my mother how to give the toys personality. It really was the turning point for the business, but that's not really what this story is about.

So, in the meantime, Henry and I opened the large wooden door. The door was heavy and had all sorts of wonderful characters carved into it. One scene particularly delighted me. It was a carving of a wonderfully vibrant unicorn with a young girl sitting upon its back. I swear the girl looked just like me. Slowly it opened and revealed a room of untold wonders. Rows and rows of shelves and workbenches full of the most amazing

looking toys. I felt emotions overtake me. These were my dads. Most everything in this room had been made by him.

“Lucy! Look at this!” yelled out Henry, holding a wooden train with the most amazing details carved and painted in it.

The train also had gears and other mechanics and the track it sat on had some sort of pully system on it. Clearly the train could move around the track on its own. We could have easily forgotten what we here for and never found the carousel among all these wonders of play.

“Focus!” I said, not just talking to Henry, but to myself as well. “We are on a mission here. Let's find the Carousel.”

“Right.” replied Henry.

We went deeper into the room, inspecting every shelf and workspace. There were indescribable works of craftsmanship in every toy we encountered, but no carousel. We reached the back wall and looked at each other with a shrug.

“It has to be here!” I whined in disappointment.

Henry paused. “It is,” he said. “I can feel it.”

“Where?” I replied.

“Let's just sit back and take a moment. It's probably right under our eyes.”

So we both sat down on the floor and just rested for a moment. Henry put his hands behind his head and laid back with his head on the floor. No sooner than he finished laying down, he gasped, “Uh, Lucy. I think you should look up.”

“What?” I replied.

“Just look up.”

So I put my hands behind my head and laid down on the floor next to him. Amazement overwhelmed my senses. Tears once again filled my eyes. There it was, glorious. An amazing toy carousel, a good five feet in diameter, was hanging from the ceiling. Large, thick ropes swung under the great toy and held it aloft above us.

“So how do we get it down?” asked Henry.

I wiped the tears out of my eyes and followed the ropes across the ceiling. They all seemed to gather together at one point and then climb down the wall.

“There!” I exclaimed. “There's a lever on the wall over there!”

Excited, we ran over to the section of the wall where the lever was.

“Well, here goes!” I said as I pulled the lever.

To our surprise, the carousel did not begin moving down! Rather, we began moving up. I screamed. Henry almost fell out of the platform as it began climbing, but I grabbed a hold of him and pulled him back on. Slowly we ascended into the air, higher and higher, until we were at the same level as the carousel. So many feelings were gathering inside me I didn't know what to do with them. I was excited, I was proud of my dad for building it, I could feel his love in it, then I was sad because he was not there. As the lift stopped, next to us was a large platform that was connected to the carousel, so we both stepped onto it.

“Look!” said Henry excitedly.

He was pointing at a key hole on what appeared to be the carousel's control panel. Of course, the control panel was just a carving. This was a toy. Never-the-less, it did have a real key hole in it and appeared to have many gears and springs. I quickly pulled out my key and was overcome with joy. An uncontrollable smile filled my face.

"This is it!" I exclaimed ecstatically, lifting the key up towards the hole.

"Don't forget to pull it back out after you wind it," Henry added, reminding me of Drosselmeyer's directions.

I slid the key down into the key hole on the carved control panel. It slowly sank in, and I could hear the tumbler pins falling into place. Then I carefully turned it. There was resistance, but it turned. With each turn there was a winding sound. I turned and turned and turned and turned it. Finally, it would turn no more. I withdrew the key and stuck in my pocket. We stood there with exhaustless anticipation, waiting... waiting... waiting... Nothing happened.

"Now what?" I sighed.

"There must be a start button," replied Henry. "These type of wind up toys always have a start button."

I looked around the carefully crafted toy carousel. There were no real buttons on the control panel carving. There were no buttons anywhere around the platform we sat on. I drew my attention over to the center of the carousel, where the beautifully crafted animals were waiting to spin around. There, against the curved center wall was a large red button.

"Over there," I pointed to Henry.

"Oh!," he replied. "Be careful."

There was a three foot gap between the platform and the carousel. We very cautiously left the platform and climbed across the open spaces onto the carousel itself. A quick glance down was all that was needed to remind me how dangerously high up we were. As we left the platform, it swung out a little, causing me to shriek as I nearly slipped over the edge. Gravity quickly took hold of me as I felt it urge me downward. A quick reflex reaction brought my hands to a solid hold upon the carousel's edge.

I screamed and shrieked. "I'm going to die!" It was amazing that neither my mom nor Drosselmeyer heard the screams.

"You're going to be okay, Lucy," yelled back Henry. "I've got you."

Henry reached down and grabbed my hands. With Henry's help, I climbed back up and stood upon the carousel. We navigated around the intricately carved animals and walked up to the button.

"Ready?" asked Henry.

"Let's do it!" I replied and pressed the button.

A fog horn sounded, followed by a series of clicking noises. Music, like that of a music box, began playing, and then a loud announcer voice came over the speakers. "All riders must mount a character immediately. All riders must mount a character immediately."

Henry and I looked at each other and shrugged. Okay, why not. I climbed onto a

wondrously designed unicorn that looked very much like Lavender from my dreams. Henry climbed onto a humorously posed sea lion that was right next to me.

The announcer came on again. "All riders are secure. Stand by for portal activation."

"What's it mean by 'portal activation?'" I asked.

"It'll be okay, Lucy," replied Henry. He seemed to know a lot more about what was happening than I did.

Suddenly the carousel began to turn.

"It's working!" I shrieked, unaware of what was about to happen.

It started off slow. The animals lifted up and down on their poles as carousel animals do. Then faster and faster it began to pick up speed; too much speed. My muscles tightened as fear began to creep in.

"This is it!" yelled Henry over the noise that the speed of the carousel was now making. "Don't panic! Everything will be fine! Trust me!"

Faster and faster it went until we were nothing but a blur on the ceiling. How I was ever able to hold onto my unicorn, I do not know. It was as if the carousel had its own center of gravity. We spun and spun, around and around and around. I think I may have even heard a sonic boom, indicating we broke the sound barrier! Then there was light everywhere. Light was all I could see, bright and blurry. Then, suddenly it was dark. There was no more movement. There was no more noise. It was just silent and dark, and I felt as if I were laying in grass. How odd.

CHAPTER 4

to be continued...