

Suzanne L. Nikolaisen
3573 South Centennial Road
Magna, UT 84044-2479
(801) 250-8090
suzanne@softcom.net

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The Enchanted Carousel

by Suzanne L. Nikolaisen
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Silver moonbeams of the newly risen moon caressed the arthritic branches of the ancient oak tree outside Amy's window. She watched the night with awe. The oak branches, a filigree of shadows, seemed to respond to the moon and to reach gently for it. A soft wind sighed through the cracks around the window, and Amy pulled the lace curtain aside to see the ethereal wonderland of her grandfather's gardens under the moonlight.

Amy's shoulder muscles were tight, she had spent most of the afternoon laying out the Autumn issue of Happy Trails, a hiking magazine that was distributed across the western United States. As editor, she loved working with the writers, and finding new hiking trails were a perk of the job. There were many hiking trails within walking distance of her home that was located just inside Pine Grove Canyon. She sighed, relaxing. The night was beautiful.

There had always been a special, magical quality to her grandfather's home and gardens. Her Grandfather, had loved to garden. Healthy vines of ivy climbed up the front of the old house and roses, iris, and daisies crowded the flower beds. She tried to keep the gardens nice, but she just didn't have the talent for it that her grandfather had. As a child she had easily imagined fairies living amongst the flower gardens. She had once asked her Grandfather what he thought of magic, and fairy creatures, but he had just smiled and never answered.

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Her Grandfather had seemed to know that they lived in a special place, he just would never talk about it. She smiled enjoying the memory of his wrinkled face, and his warm brown eyes showing his mischief as he allowed her to think what she would about the fairies and magic surrounding their home. He had always encouraged her imagination, and they had spent many evenings in front of the fireplace where he had told her wonderful stories. There had never been any fairies, but plenty of beautiful flowers and her grandfathers ready smile. Tears filled her eyes.

Outside, shadows draped softly over the gardens as though a cloak of black chiffon had been tossed over the world. The stars shone brightly, traced lovingly with tendrils of wispy clouds. Amy sighed, she loved this place. Her soft honey-blond hair was pulled into a French braid from which wisps of hair escaped. She leaned closer to the window, a loose strand of hair falling gently against her cheek.

She had seen something move. Maybe it was a deer, but she knew that it wasn't. The oak branches now obscured her view as though the tree were protecting the being below. With a sigh she stopped looking at the garden and focused on her own reflection in the glass of the window. What was she thinking? Ever since her grandfather had died, her imagination had grown wilder than the wilderness surrounding her two story home. But, despite her own feeling of childishness she glanced down into the garden again. The witching hour added a sense of uncertainty to the shadows.

What was she looking for? An owl? A wandering fairy as elusive as the starlight? She laughed in spite of herself. The romantic notions that she had been sporting, were just that. It was far more likely that a trespasser was wandering around down there. Her home was at the end of a private lane. She was a mile from the nearest neighbors.

Her grandfather had told her that the house had been built back in the 1800's and the style of the flowing staircase and open front entry hall gave the feel of another time. The couple who had built the house had come from New York, he had been a doctor sorely needed in the little town that was growing, but he had hated cities so they had lived on the outskirts. Her grandfather had made it sound so romantic. Their only son had mysteriously disappeared after

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finishing college. Her grandfather had definitely had his own imagination. She smiled. The old house was now hers, it had been left to her by her grandfather when he had died, last summer. She would have given innumerable houses and inheritances to have him back again.

The gravel road, that led out of her private pocket of wilderness and toward the neighborhood, eventually led to the city. Her home was surrounded by a forest of pine, oak and aspen which spread over the surrounding acres. This was the last region of forest before neighborhoods and freeways chopped the mountainsides apart.

With moonlight as soft as the flame of a candle, she couldn't make out anything in the shadows below. Suddenly her vision seemed to clear. There was a man! He was crouched beneath the gnarled trunk of the old pine just outside the front door. She had held great tea parties with her dog Sam under the pine tree as a child. The shadows hid most of him from view, but it looked as though he was naked. A pale wash of moonlight fell across his ankle and thigh.

What was he doing? The wind whispered amongst the tree branches. She saw his eyes, he wasn't looking at her, but he was looking back toward the forest. He looked frightened. She stepped back from the window, her mind working at how to help him. Wouldn't he be cold? Grabbing a blanket from the linen closet, she ran down the wooden staircase to the front door. When she opened the door, she was afraid that he might have disappeared, but she found him still half hidden in the shadows. He watched her with curiosity. With a feeling of sudden shyness, she made herself step through the doorway into the pale world of cascading moonlight.

He stood up, cloaked by midnight shadows, and moved behind the tree, where he stood watching her. Very slowly she approached him. She was afraid that if she moved too quickly he might disappear as though he were one of the smokey ghosts that she had imagined lurking in the woods. The night was cold and chills traced her arms.

She was embarrassed by her boldness to help him. His eyes were light; an indiscernible color in the silver moonlight, and they warmed to her as he realized the blanket was for him. His hair reached his shoulders and he had an aura about him - it seemed to her that he had stepped into her world from a different, much older one.

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He reached out and took the blanket, swiftly wrapping it around his shoulders.

"Thank you." His voice was a rich warm tone. The night air was heavy with the scent of pine, and they stood in silence for a moment before she remembered her manners. She felt as though she were waking from a dream. He seemed familiar, but she couldn't remember ever seeing him. Her emotions seemed foreign, and she didn't understand what she was feeling.

"Are you hungry?" She managed to ask.

"No. Thank you for asking."

"Do you need anything? A ride to the city? Do you need to call someone?"

The line of his jaw became set, and his face suddenly intense, as though he had found someone he had been looking for. She saw the recognition in his eyes, but she didn't know who he was.

"I could use a cup of coffee. If it's not inconvenient." He tried to make the suggestion sound casual, but she could see that he was shivering. Her hands were shaking by the time that she put the coffee on. He seemed so familiar, and yet she couldn't remember ever seeing him before. His hair was a lustrous shade of black and his eyes were so like the ocean under storm clouds that she had a hard time not staring into them. They talked, but they stayed with safe subjects. Both of them avoided the obvious topic - what was he doing naked, in her yard?

"So, this is your home?" He asked, and Amy had the feeling that it was more of a statement than a question. Had he been looking for her?

"Yes, I grew up here."

He looked at her, the recognition in his eyes again. His eyes were stormy with emotion and their hands brushed as he reached for the cream. Her heart started beating faster, she just wanted him to reach out and take her hand.

"It has changed." His statement startled her.

"Changed? How so?" She had lived with her grandfather almost all of her life and he had never remodeled. Her grandfather had said that he liked their home to be familiar and comfortable to live in.

The man looked away suddenly uneasy. Was he a friend of her Grandfather's?

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“Would you excuse me for a moment?”

After directing him to the bathroom, she sat down to wait for his answer. How had the house changed? For that matter when had he been there before?

She had been naïve to wait for him after the change in his attitude. After ten minutes she went to the bathroom and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. She opened the door and saw that the window was open, he was gone. Why had he left? She felt a tug of pain in her heart. Irrational tears stung her eyes, but didn't fall. She filled her mind with reasons why it was good that he had left, but they all felt hollow. He was a stranger, and she shouldn't have invited him in to begin with. What if he had been dangerous? She could see through all of her excuses. He had seemed to be a gentle man and she felt instinctively that she was right.

The next night the moon had begun to fade from its full brightness. She did not see him, but she watched for him. Every night, before going to bed she checked the gardens to see if he was out there. He had disappeared as a spirit might, and she wanted to see him again, if at least to assure herself that she hadn't been hallucinating. Nearly a month passed and she saw no sign of him. Amy found herself longing to see him again. She had never been one to fall head over heels in love, in minutes, but that was exactly what had happened. As the days slowly passed she found herself depressed that he had never come back. Nothing seemed to work to distract her, and she couldn't understand her emotions.

Late one autumn evening, she went hiking in the woods, following a familiar path that she had often wandered as a child. The moon was swiftly overtaken by bulky thunder heads. The air smelled fresh as though it had just been laundered, and the autumn wind gently played with her hair. Amy took a deep breath enjoying the scent of wild violets and the earthy rich aroma of dying leaves.

Amy was still trying to forget about the man that had appeared in the garden. The recognition in his eyes had intrigued her. How did she know him? She supposed that it was just as well that he had disappeared, but they had clicked during that hour in the kitchen. It had seemed so right that they be together, and yet she had never even found out his name.

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Slowly, rain began to fall as she neared a fork in the trail. One path led to a field of wildflowers, and the other led up into the canyon, winding through a forest of pine and aspen trees. Amy chose the path to the field, and then when the path disappeared she started across the field passing the violets, that she had detected in the night air, growing amongst the lush meadow grasses.

With a jolt of shock running through her, she stopped. Nestled into a nearby grove of trees, was a carousel. The rain made the air seem to shimmer with color and light as though the carousel were actually in motion. She remembered the summer carnival that had launched itself yearly in her elementary school parking lot. There had been a tiny carousel for the younger children to ride. This carousel was much bigger, although not full sized.

Surprised, but swiftly getting drenched, she ran through the long grasses, into the shelter of the carousel. The rain kept falling. She hadn't thought to bring an umbrella. In the shelter of the carousel, she could see that it was in bad shape. The wooden floorboards were cracked and falling apart in places. Mirrors that surrounded the axis of the carousel were broken and shards lay below on the grass. The carved animals on the carousel were what intrigued her the most. The animals and carved beasts showed no sign of age or deterioration.

A wild goose with black and gray markings was frozen mid-flight, big enough only for a child to ride, and a fox with his rust colored coat had been frozen in mid run, a full size mount. After passing other intricately carved and painted creatures she came to the carousel horse. The only horse on the entire carousel. He was a magnificent carving. His dark chestnut hair curled wildly as though it had been frozen in the wind, and he looked healthy and strong. She looked closer, tracing the mane with her finger tips. The eyes were wild and gray. They were the color of storm clouds. Gently she followed the curls of the mane, her breath coming quicker. Then abruptly she broke away. What was she thinking?

She shivered and stepped away. Her imagination! It was only her imagination! The rain was still coming down in torrents and she shivered in the cool, damp air. The man's eyes - they had been the same shade! No! She couldn't let her imagination get the better of her, and it was definitely beginning to stampede out of control.

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Night had descended and she was standing in the remains of what must have once been a splendid carousel, but she had never seen it before. Whoever had brought it to the meadow would have had to come up her private road and carry it in pieces to the meadow and reassemble. The carousel was only a broken down facade of what it had once been, the only survivors were the beautifully carved beasts. She was frightened. What was it doing in the meadow? She would have known if there was a carousel near the house! Especially as a child she would have known, and the carousel looked as though it had broken down where it was. She attempted to brave the storm and head home, but after a few steps a bolt of lightening crackled across the sky and she retreated to the relative safety of the carousel, soaked from her excursion.

In the darkness she saw that something was struggling. Crossing the uneven boards she found that the horse was gone and an ethereal glow was surrounding the man that she had found in the gardens outside her home. It was him! He was struggling against painful looking chains that bound his wrists. She knelt down beside him trying to help him free himself. His eyes met hers and his hands reached out to her. She couldn't get the chains off of him. Pain threatened to fill his eyes entirely and a tear fell from his cheek landing on her outstretched hand.

With his eyes closed, and the glow intensifying she decided to step back, unwilling to let go of his hand, but afraid of what was happening. The light flashed and when she could see him again she saw that he had changed back into the carousel horse. What kind of terrible curse was this? How could it have happened? Had she eaten something bad at lunch? No, it wasn't that. She hadn't imagined any of what she had seen. Her eyes were moist with tears and she felt that she had experienced a loss greater than no other before her. Had she blown her only shot at helping him?

After a few moments of shivering at the edge of the carousel she went back to the horse and sat down, as close to the horse as she could, for shelter and to offer him some kind of comfort, if that was possible. She tried to think of how she could help, but she was so tired. After only a few moments she had fallen asleep.

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The sunlight was what woke her. The blinding sunbeams catching the early dust motes in mid air. The meadow was sparkling and the air smelled fresh from the rain. The carousel jerked forward, or was that her imagination? Then slowly it turned backwards once, and she clung to the pole, to which the mighty horse was tethered. With a tortured groan the carousel began to fall apart. The roof began to cave in and with luminescent flashes the other carousel animals, forest animals that had been captured flashed to life scampering and flying away.

Light began to glow around the horse and she stood back. She could see him trying to emerge, fighting against the enchantment. The chains that bound his human wrists fell away to powder, and he emerged from the hazy, ghostlike image of the carousel horse. He dropped, exhausted onto the floorboards.

“Come on!” She shouted, afraid that he wouldn’t be able to get up.

He looked around and saw that the carousel was falling apart, quickly destroying itself, in the early morning sunshine. He got to his feet with her help and she grabbed her blanket that was now laying on the carousel floor boards nearby, wrapping it around him. They ran out into the field, she stumbled, sore and stiff from sleeping on the carousel in the cold autumn air.

He put his hand against her cheek, and leaned over and kissed her gently. Her lips tingled.

“I am free now.”

Amy waited. Now she would know where he had come from.

“Many years ago, my parents built what is now your home. This was in the early 1800’s.” He stopped as he saw her face register shock. Her grandfather’s story was true. A smile flickered across his lips lighting his face for a few seconds. “When I came home from college, the local witch, who was young, and actually very pretty...” He looked away. “Well she wanted to marry me, and I didn’t want anything to do with her or her spells. I really didn’t think that she had any power, but she enchanted me in her anger, binding me to her forest carousel, to be freed only by love.” He met her eyes again and she could feel herself blush.

“At first she visited me daily, and then over the years she forgot about me. I think she died almost a century ago. That was when the carousel began to disappear for large amounts of

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time, except for when the moon was full. That was the only time there seemed to be enough power for the carousel to manifest, and on those nights all of the animals and I would be free to escape for a few hours, but then we would be drawn back to the carousel and imprisoned. I was not clothed as the spell did not keep my clothing from disintegrating, just my body, much like the forest animals.”

“She, the witch, had hoped that I would grow to love her... How could such manipulation create love?” His storm colored eyes were filled with emotion and anger. Amy realized that she had been holding her breath, and she exhaled.

“It couldn’t.” She whispered. He smiled and touched her cheek, gently brushing a strand of her hair away from her face.

“I saw you as a child, hiking with your Grandfather, and when you became a woman, I - I fell in love with you. This...” he paused, and she met his eyes. “our love, which I now know you feel too, is what has freed me.” She remembered the afternoons that she had passed in the meadow. How she had felt drawn there as a college student. Many Sunday’s had been spent amongst the wildflowers, reading a book, and drinking water from a canteen. She had thought she had been alone, but now she knew. Her heart had known immediately, he had been there with her.

She looked away from his stormy eyes, and with his arm around her they walked away from the carousel, which she could hear falling apart behind them. Neither of them looked back. They crossed the meadow, away from the dark enchantments and pain, and into the warm sunshine filled morning.