



NICKOLAI OF THE NORTH

'Enchantingly original' THE INDEPENDENT

LUCY DANIEL RABY

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Illustrated by Ted Dewan



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First published in Great Britain in 2005
by Hodder Children's Books
This paperback edition first published in 2006

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A Catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN-10: 0 340 90301 5
ISBN-13: 9780340903018

Typeset in Bembo by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The paper and board used in this paperback by Hodder Children's
Books are natural recyclable products made from wood grown in
sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder Children's Books
a division of Hachette Children's Books
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London NW1 3BH

Lucy Daniel Raby started writing as soon as she could hold a pen, and has never stopped. She wrote her first play at eight: a nativity play told from the point of view of the donkey, which was performed for many years at her nursery school. Since university she has worked as a full-time professional writer in advertising, journalism and finally children's TV. She had the idea for *Nickolai of the North*, her first book, during a conversation with her daughter Isabel about who filled Santa Claus's stocking when he was a child. She lives on a farm in Surrey with her family.

Praise for *Nickolai of the North*

'A classic myth in the making' *Guardian*

'Enchantingly original . . . Honest writing, rich imaginings and thrilling twists ensure that this will become a Christmas classic.' Christina Hardyment, *Independent*

'A real Yuletide treat . . . if it doesn't give you that Xmas feeling, then there is no help for it: you have become Scrooge.' Amanda Craig, *The Times*

'This definitive story of how Santa came to be recreates the magic of Christmas with elves, fairies, flying reindeer, and plenty of snow and ice. A classic myth in the making.' Starred review, *Publishing News*

And look out for Nickolai's further adventures in *Nickolai's Quest*, coming soon.

Reviews from Nickolai's fans

'I have finished the book and it is great!'

'I really enjoyed the bit where Nickolai's mum wins that race. Overall the book is really fantastic.'

'I am writing to you to say what a lovely book it is, you are a very good author. I would love for you to publish another one, make a series of them and I could read them and collect them.'

'I wanted to save the ending till Christmas but because I just loved your book, I finished it too soon! Only a few books grip me enough to read them every day, but this magical one did!'

For Mum, Dad, Pete and Isabel

PROLOGUE

The Secret Kingdom

It happened one Winter Solstice Eve at the North Pole, many centuries ago.

It was the darkest end of the year. There had been no sunrise for several months and the moon shone continually on the snowy wastes. The wind howled across the vast, empty spaces. The Northern Lights danced in the sky, great shimmering curtains of rose pink and ghostly green and pale yellow, towering above the earth. They swept to and fro across the heavens in a display so majestic and so breathtaking you had to see it to believe it. But there was no one there to see it, apart from the Arctic wolves and the polar bears.

At the stroke of midnight, a deep rumbling noise came from below. The ice heaved and groaned and gave a great shudder. An ear-splitting sound tore the air and a gigantic crack opened up in the ice. If anyone had been there and looked down into it, they would have seen the strangest place on earth. Hidden beneath the surface of the North Pole, deep inside the polar ice

cap, lay a secret world of tunnels and caves.

They were all shapes and sizes. There were stately caverns that looked like the insides of cathedrals, with arched roofs and pillars. There were countless grottos, each one opening out into the next, and endless tunnels, twisting and turning and crisscrossing each other in a mind-boggling maze. It was the sort of place where you could get lost for ever.

The whole labyrinth was full of strange, intricate rock formations – stalagmites and stalactites which grew out of the ice floor, hung down from the roof and covered the walls. It was empty and silent, except for the slow drip drip of water. And very dark, except for a faint, eerie blue glow which filtered down from above.

Like an inquisitive animal, the Northern Lights curved down towards the earth and peered into the crack. Fascinated, they poured through the caverns, filling them with brilliant colour and finding their way into every dark corner.

For a few miraculous moments, the Northern Lights held hands with the earth's magnetic forces. There was an enormous explosion of energy. It released a swarm of tiny winged creatures, like buzzing insects.

These were the Light Fairies. They glowed so brightly and flitted around so fast you could hardly see them. They flowed through the caverns, fluttering everywhere, touching the lifeless rocks. And as they did, they brought them to life, transforming them into beautiful dainty creatures with pointed ears and

ice-blue eyes full of dancing Lights.

The first elves had been born and the Elfin Kingdom had been created.

As quickly as it had opened, the ice creaked and groaned and the crack slammed shut, sealing off the secret Kingdom from the prying eyes of the world.



When the Lights Went Out

Nickolai sat on his mother's lap, shrieking with glee as her sleigh raced along the tunnels at breakneck speed. He was barely a year old, but big for his age. Like all elfin children, Nickolai had pointed ears and eyes the colour of cornflowers. His chubby cheeks were flushed with excitement and his ears twitched as the wind whistled past them, blowing his blond curls about. He was loving every minute of this rollercoaster ride.

His Light Fairy, Elvina, was not enjoying it at all. She'd tucked herself away down his front and was quivering against his chest, making agitated twittering noises. She peered out timidly at the shopfronts and houses flashing past in a blur, letting out squeaks of alarm every time they swerved round a corner. She was of a nervous disposition. Not a good thing when her elfling had all the makings of a boy racer.

It was the Winter Solstice Sleigh Race, the most important event in the elfin calendar. Its route snaked around the whole underground city as the sleighs roared down the ice streets, dived through narrow

alleyways, ducked around courtyards, then soared high above the heads of the crowds.

These were no ordinary sleighs. They were colourfully decorated and hung about with millions of tiny bells which jingled loudly. Although their drivers steered them with reins, there were no huskies, horses or beasts of any kind pulling them along. They had no wheels or engines. They flew along through the air, just above the ground, at astonishing speeds.

The force that drove them came from something so mysterious, no human would have been able to understand it. The sleighs were powered by the invisible magnetic forces at the North Pole.

Over the centuries, the elves had discovered that if they moved their pointed ears around and concentrated very hard, they could link up with these magnetic forces. They could tap in to this power and use it like an electric current to drive their sleighs and all the other machines and tools they invented. A complicated transport system of 'sleigh lines' developed around the Kingdom, and it took years of practice to master the skills of navigation.

No one had practised harder than Nickolai's mother; Ella had started when she was a small girl. She was a wisp of a thing, fair and slender, with fragile looks that concealed a will of granite. She had been left a young widow with a baby when her husband was killed in an avalanche. It had been tough, but she was determined to build a better life for both of them. This

meant being good at things that men usually did. No woman had ever entered the race before, so even being considered as a candidate had been an uphill task. But her steely determination had finally gained her a place.

And now she was determined to win. For ahead of them in Solstice Square lay the trophy – the Solstice Cup. And a whole year of special elfin privileges, which would come in very handy.

She tightened her grip round Nickolai's belly as they approached a sharp bend.

'Hang on tight, Nickolai! Here comes the big one!'

They swerved round the corner into Great Bear Avenue. Ahead of them they could see a crowd of other sleighs, weaving in and out of each other, jostling to get ahead. They were rushing towards the opening into Solstice Square – a circle of light showing a festive scene beyond – and the finishing line, a row of icicles strung across the gap, sparkling in the Light.

'Come on! Let's do it together!' cried Ella, and she let Nickolai hold the reins with her. She twitched her ears in small circular movements, searching for the power that crackled in the air.

There was a sudden jolt and the sleigh shot forward. Ella glanced at her son and saw with shock that he too was moving his ears, in the slow, deliberate way it took adult elves years to master.

He really was helping her!

She steered the sleigh skilfully around the others, then there was another spurt and she overtook them

and zoomed into the lead. A cheer went up from the elves lining the streets as the sleigh streaked ahead at lightning speed and the finishing line rushed towards them.

Seconds later, they burst through the line of icicles. A roar rose up from the huge crowd. Ella reined in the power and drew the sleigh to a halt on the ice, where it spun round several times before coming to rest. She gazed breathlessly at the sea of cheering faces, then grabbed her son and hugged him tight. They had done it!

‘We won! We won!’ she cried triumphantly. She lifted him high over her head. Nickolai grinned gummily and waved his arms and legs around like a fat little string puppet. The crowd surged forward and clamoured round to congratulate the first female elf ever to win the Winter Solstice Sleigh Race.

Solstice Square was the grandest and most important of the city squares. It was in this cavern, according to legend, that the crack had opened all those years ago and the Northern Lights had created the Kingdom. The Lights still filtered down from above, through the domed ceiling, where the ice was thinnest.

Tonight, on Winter Solstice Eve, they were at their strongest, and the square at its most festive. Hundreds of elves, all of them dressed in their Solstice best, thronged the cavern and jostled each other excitedly. They wore pointed hats tipped with bells and their

costumes were made of gauzy material that shimmered different colours in the Light.

Light Fairies swarmed around like insects, following their elves and buzzing in high-pitched squeaking voices. No elf was ever seen without their own Light Fairy fluttering around, somewhere nearby. They were their soul mates, constant companions throughout their lives; the moment an elf was born, a new Light Fairy would fly down from the Lights and never leave their side.

The elfin band played their strange, unearthly music and elfin dancers whirled around the floor, spinning like mad things in never-ending patterns, their coloured costumes swirling.

The square was full of stalls selling traditional Solstice goodies: snow berry pies, crystal cakes, starlight syllabubs and snowball ices. Solstice gifts and toys were changing hands everywhere – Light Fairy dolls which glowed when you smiled at them, toy sleighs with their own magical built-in power supply and miniature scale models of the Kingdom, full of moving figures. It was Elfin custom to give gifts on Winter Solstice Eve, because it was the anniversary of the birth of the Kingdom and a thanksgiving celebration.

On an ice throne sat King Vilmar, watching over the festivities. Vilmar was a direct descendant of the Very First Elf, and reputed to be at least a thousand years old. He was small and wizened, with a very long white beard and twinkling blue eyes that almost disappeared

behind the creases in his face. He was wearing a crown made of crystal and long, flowing white robes edged with silver. He was extremely wise and very kind, and he smiled benevolently at his subjects as they celebrated.

As midnight approached, the atmosphere began to build to a climax. A great ice bell began to chime. The crowd fell silent as the old king stood up creakily, clutching the Solstice Cup – a magnificent trophy carved from ice crystal. Only a descendant of his ancient line could perform this ritual. He held it up for all to see.

As the last stroke chimed, a shaft of brilliant Light burst through the dome and touched the Cup, making it sparkle and shimmer. A gasp of wonder went up from the elves. There was a hush, then Vilmar's cracked old voice rang out in the silence.

'It gives me great pleasure to present the Solstice Cup to this year's winners,' he announced. 'Ella Grishkin and her son Nickolai!'

A roar of approval rose up from the elves as Ella made her way towards the stage, clutching Nickolai. People cooed at him and patted her on the back as they passed. Nickolai was revelling in the attention, and Ella floated along as though she were in a dream. But she was determined not to be overcome by shyness. She was champion now.

She stepped forward and swept a deep curtsy. Then she straightened up and looked into Vilmar's misty old

eyes. They crinkled as the king smiled at her fondly.

‘Well done, my dear!’ he whispered. ‘I always knew you could do it!’

Vilmar placed the champion’s robe around Ella’s shoulders. It was made of red velvet lined with thick white fur, and had a red hood edged in the same. It was the greatest honour in the Kingdom to wear it and Ella was acutely aware that she was the first elfin woman to have it placed on her shoulders.

To resounding applause, Vilmar presented the Cup. Nickolai reached a pudgy hand towards it, attracted by its swirling colours. He gurgled with delight as Ella let him hold it with her and turned to face the crowd. The elves went wild, cheering themselves hoarse and throwing their hats in the air with a loud jingling sound. The music started up and they began to dance again, whirling around even faster than before.

At first the crowd didn’t hear the low rumbling noise that started up from deep within the earth. But as the rumbling grew louder, the cavern began to tremble.

The music died away.

One by one, the elves stopped dancing and stared at each other in alarm. The cavern began to shudder and the rumbling grew into a roar. Black smoke poured out of the ice, billowing round the cavern and filling it with a foul stench.

There was a loud cracking sound and a hole opened in the floor like a jagged, toothless grin. It hissed and fizzled, letting out a puff of steam and another belch of