

Benjamin Nicholas & The Golden Key

By

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Chapter 1: The Gift

The small house with peeling paint shivered in the cold. Freezing wind shook the house while snow and ice banged against the windows. It was December the 24th, and the house was dark. No colorful lights framed its windows. No pine wreath with ribbon hung from its door. The inside was just as gloomy and displayed no decorations except for one room.

Delana Nicholas sat in a rocking chair with her four-month-old baby in her arms. She swayed, sang softly, and smiled peacefully at her little boy. A small, electric heater hummed in the baby's room, making it warm and cozy. The dingy walls of the tiny space didn't dim the glowing lights of a small, decorated tree resting on a side table, and nestled in the corner of the baby's crib was a stuffed reindeer.

"It's almost time," Delana said. Midnight was only minutes away, and she watched the clock on the table. Her eyes widened with excitement as the large hand finally clicked upward to join the small hour hand. The moment she had waited for had finally arrived.

"Welcome Night of Wonder!" Delana said. She leaned over and tenderly kissed her baby's soft, brown curls. "It's your first Night of Wonder, Benjamin Nicholas, and your life is just beginning. What a special boy you will be."

Delana held him tight and closed her eyes. How she wished they were in the Throne Room at Sankelves. Delana smiled as the image filled her mind, and she began to sing:

Night of Wonder,

Night of Light,

The Giver of Gifts,

Takes his flight.

With golden key,

And dressed in red,

He travels the world,

Upon his sled.

Delana finished the song and inhaled deeply. She knew what must be done and done quickly. The Night of Wonder would soon be over. Keeping Benjamin firmly in her arms, she reached for the necklace that hung from her neck. She slipped it over her head, held the necklace in her hand, and stared at it. A golden key danced softly on a delicate, gold chain.

“Here’s your first gift, Benjamin. Do you know what this is?” Delana asked, letting the key dangle from her hand. “Of course you don’t. It’s my golden key. Now it’s your golden key, Benjamin. I give it to you freely and by my own choice.” She placed the chain over her son’s head.

“You are so small now, my little Benjamin, but this is the key to your magic,” Delana tenderly rested the key on her son’s chest, “the magic inside every child born into the families of Nicholas.” Covering the key with her hand, she closed her eyes and wished as hard as she could. Her breath seemed to stop, though her heart beat wildly. Benjamin should be given the key forged by his father, but that wasn’t possible. Would Delana’s key work, instead? Slowly, she opened her eyes, raised her hand, and looked down. The key and the chain were gone. Both had disappeared, as they should, and rested within Benjamin. “It will grow inside you, my sweet son.” She lifted her son and held him lovingly against her cheek. “And when you are ready,” she whispered, “the key will re-appear. Then, you will know how special you truly are.”

Delana smiled, but felt tired. It was late and perhaps time for them both to sleep. She walked the few steps to the crib and lowered Benjamin to the soft bed below. Delana swept her hand down to caress Benjamin’s curls, but she could not reach him. Alarmed, she stretched both arms forward, her hands grasping, but now Benjamin and the crib were even further away. Delana tried to step closer, but an invisible force held her tightly and pulled her backwards.

“Benjamin!” Delana cried out, but no sound left her lips. She twisted and turned her body, trying to shake herself loose from the unseen grip. The mysterious grip remained tight as a blue veil closed in around her. Delana didn’t feel the wall as she moved through it and disappeared into the night. The room heater continued to hum, and the small tree flickered happily. Benjamin slept peacefully in his crib, unaware his mother was gone.

Far north and hidden from sight, the Grey Mountain of Sankelves stood concealed by wind and snow. The great Throne Room was filled with thousands of revelers cheering as the Flight of the Giver had just ended. Bursts of light in every color exploded like fireworks, but suddenly stopped. Blackness, darker than a night without moon or stars, fell over the room, and the voices slipped into silence. It only lasted a few seconds before even brighter lights exploded, and the crowd screamed again wildly. Such a special effect had never been experienced on the Night of Wonder. Master Jarrot continued with the ceremony, but knew that the moments of darkness were not planned. There had been a disturbance. He could feel it.

Deep within the mountain, hundreds of rooms and hallways stood quiet and empty, though the smell of hot chocolate and freshly baked cookies still lingered in the cool, crisp air. It was 2:00 a.m. on December 25th, but not everyone was asleep. All four masters of the Nicholas Worlds had been called to an emergency meeting in the great Throne Room. They stood alone in the now silent room. Tall and mighty carved stone walls rose above their heads. The throne itself, the back reaching over 30 feet, sat regally at the very front with the slowly-turning Yulseer positioned before it. The four masters paced back and forth with agitation and concern.

“We know that all of the Nicholas Worlds experienced the black-out at the same time,” Master Jarrot, the Master of Sankelves, said. The other three masters nodded.

Master Jarrot took his seat on the throne. He was dressed in a long, red robe with a gold belt at his waist. A golden chain with a Nicholas golden key hung from his neck. He rubbed his brown, bearded chin in thought while his brown eyes peered out in search of answers. “It has been confirmed that this sudden blackness occurred at the exact same time Delana Nicholas disappeared.”

“She couldn’t have just disappeared,” Master Trane of Toy’sland said. He twisted the gold belt that tied the waist of his purple robe. A similar brown beard covered his chin, though it appeared a bit tousled at the moment. “What would have caused such an event?”

“Delana gave her infant son, Benjamin Nicholas, her key,” Master Jarrot continued. “She gave it freely, but she disappeared soon afterward.”

The group of masters fell silent. When a Nicholas child was born, the father forged a key in the Blue Flame of Snonoble Forest. The new key was then passed to his infant child on their first Night of Wonder. It had always been so. Never had a key been forged by the mother and never had a Nicholas given away their own key.

Master Cursa of Outerworlds lowered her black hood. Black hair fell straight to her shoulders, and she looked at the other masters with piercing blue eyes. She was unlike any other Nicholas. “What choice did she have?” Master Cursa uttered, waving her black, draped arms with frustration. “Delana was bound by the past. How else could she offer her son a future? It was the boy’s only chance to receive a Nicholas key.”

“What should be done?” Master Garin of Snonoble Forest asked. He stood tall, his brown beard and hair curled and wild, looking like a woodsman dressed in a deep, green robe. “The Blue Flame diminished, but did not go out. Nicholases do not just disappear. Where could Delana have gone?”

“There is more,” Master Jarrot continued. “I have consulted the Yulseer. A new path has appeared and splits off from the path to Legend. Its purpose is unclear.”

“Perhaps it is the path to a new Nicholas World?” Master Cursa offered hopefully. “A world not bound by keys and outdated traditions.”

“Perhaps,” Master Jarrot answered without offering more in explanation. “But whatever has happened was meant to happen. Delana’s location is unknown, and the Yulseer would tell me no more. We must wait, see, and watch. Time will reveal the answers to this mystery.”

“But what of the child?” Master Garin asked. “Benjamin Nicholas has no mother, now that Delana has disappeared, and his father has no knowledge of the Nicholas Worlds. The boy must be brought to Sankelves. He can’t stay with the father.”

“Benjamin Nicholas must stay with his father.” Master Jarrot firmly placed his hands on the Throne and held tight.

“Impossible!” Master Garin said loudly, strongly shaking his head side to side.

The group broke apart in disagreement. More time passed as they discussed what might be done, but Master Jarrot could not be moved from his original decision. As the Master of Sankelves, the care and safekeeping of all those in the Nicholas Worlds was his responsibility.

“We have no right to take this child from his father, but I will assign one of the Stewards of Sankelves to watch over Benjamin Nicholas,” Master Jarrot said. “Danny Nicholas comes to mind as he knew Benjamin’s family. I will send for him immediately. Is that agreeable?”

Two masters nodded, but one was not yet convinced.

“What will Danny Nicholas watch for?” Master Garin asked.

“Should the boy be in any danger, he will be brought here immediately,” Master Jarrot directed, firmly. “Otherwise, Benjamin Nicholas must be treated the same as all children of Nicholas. He can return to Sankelves on the Night of Wonder of his tenth year when his key will re-appear.”

“If his key re-appears,” Master Trane commented with little confidence.

The group of Masters slipped once more into silence. A decision had been made, but the future was still uncertain...

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