

A Christmas Story



Rudolph

and the

Renegade

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Chapter One

Whipper stared in disgust at Rudolph. *He's such a stuck-up snob*, he growled to himself. *Not to mention his nose. How could anybody like him?* Mysterious as it was, the reindeer, elves, and Santa all loved him. Shaking his head, Whipper turned away as his elf friend, Zicus, finished fastening Rudolph into the harness.

Soon the famous call of Santa Claus rang throughout the North Pole Settlement. Everyone stopped to gaze at the sleigh streaking away into the starry sky.

"Hey, Whipper! Are you coming over?" hollered Zicus.

"I guess," muttered Whipper.

The two friends headed towards a lone hill crowned by a rickety house made of broken toys cemented together.

"There it stands in all its glory!" Zicus gloated. "My work of art. A symbol of how elves have been foolishly enslaved, doing work out of free will for all the greedy little children that litter Earth." Whipper nodded as he dragged his hooves through the snow drifts.

"Eh?" Zicus said after a long silence. "Feeling down about Rudolph again? Poor thing. What shall we do to take your mind off that tragedy? Some darts, perhaps?"

Whipper laughed. "Sure. Why not?"

Reaching the tiny house, Zicus ripped a curtain out of the way off the far wall. The dartboard was the shape of Rudolph's head. His eyes and features, strangely contorted, had been painted on. Protruding from the center of the board was the infamous nose. Flipping a switch on, the little elf watched the nose start to glow.

"I've had an idea, Zicus," Whipper began.

"What's that?" Zicus asked as he lit his pipe and grabbed a dart.

"You know I've always wanted to be the lead reindeer, right?"

"Aw, Whipper, this was supposed to take your mind *off* the fact that you weren't picked," Zicus groaned. "What are you back on that track for?"

"My idea," Whipper insisted, "has been bugging me for a while. Won't you listen? Without you, it won't ever work!"

"Okay..."

"Do you think you could make a small bright red ball with a tiny glowing bulb inside?"

"Sure," Zicus agreed. "I *am* an expert craftsman— elf tradition, you know. Why would you want—ooh, I know. You want me to make an imitation of Rudolph's nose. What for?"

Suddenly, an icicle dropped from the roof and the wind whistled. Startled, Zicus looked out over the frozen land. Then, he swiftly closed and barred the door checking to be sure all the windows were completely shut so that no one could hear.

"Well," Whipper replied dramatically, "I have decided that next Christmas, *I* am going to be the lead deer."

Zicus' mouth dropped. "How on earth are you going to get rid of Rudolph?" he challenged, recovering from his shock with a wicked grin.

Whipper shrugged. “When you really want something, you’ll do anything to get it. Once I knew how to transform magically into Rudolph, it didn’t take much to think of a way to get rid of him.”

Zicus snatched another dart. Carefully aiming, he shot it towards Rudolph’s nose. It landed inches away. “Of course, I’d be glad to help you ‘replace’ Rudolph in anyway I can. But it will probably take three months just to make the nose.”

Whipper smiled. “Fine. And to prevent anyone from suspecting us when Rudolph goes missing, he and I will soon be the best of buddies. Tomorrow I put my plan into action. Now, where were we in darts? Oh yes.” Tilting his head down, he fired a dart at the board. *Thud!* Rudolph’s nose flickered and switched off as the dart zapped it in the center.

“A bull’s eye!” Zicus groaned.

“Ah, yes,” Whipper smiled slyly. “My luck is about to change.”

Chapter Two

Joyfully, Rudolph led the sleigh home as the exhausted team returned from delivering the children’s presents Christmas morning.

“Another job well done,” old St. Nicolas laughed in his jolly voice as he patted each of his reindeer warmly. “You never tire of flying, do you old boy?” he asked Rudolph.

“Flying is so exhilarating! And Christmas is the only time I get to do it. When you harness me to your magic sleigh, and we work together to bring children their dreams, what could be better than that?”

Santa smiled.

“So, Santa,” Rudolph asked, “have you looked in your stocking yet?”

Santa chuckled. “Should I?” he asked. With a twinkle in his eye, he walked over and took off the reindeer’s harness.

Free from the harness, Rudolph shook himself contentedly. Christmas Day was always the same: crisp, cool air, frost covering trees, and a light, gentle snowfall. He sighed, sending traces of steam floating up into the night sky.

Everything’s just about perfect, Rudolph decided quietly. *If only Whipper and Zicus could realize what Christmas is really about.*

Walking over to the reindeer pasture, he bedded down and fell soundly asleep.

* * *

The young fawn peered out from his mother’s flank. Rows of eyes stared back at him.

“Oh, isn’t he *darling?*” cooed a doe.

“Melody, you must be so proud,” agreed another.

Melody nodded and smiled at her new son. Shyly, he smiled back. Above the bashful grin his nose flickered red and began glowing.

“What’s that?”

“Ugh! It’s like a light bulb!”

“It’s red!”

“It’s disgusting!”

“Whose side of the family did *that* come from?”

Tears streaming down her face, Melody shooed the does away and sheltered her fawn.

* * *

Rudolph tossed and turned, but the dreams raged on.

* * *

Snow crunched beneath his tiny hooves as the fawn wobbled into the field, nibbling on scattered hay.

“Hey, over here!” called one of the does.

“Keep away!” bristled Melody.

“Oh, wow,” whistled another, ignoring the doe’s outburst. “He *should* be sent to the circus.”

Pressing closer to his mother, the fawn whimpered.

“It’s unnatural.”

“It’s repulsive!”

“CLEAR OFF!” boomed a voice. The young deer looked up to see a round man marching angrily towards them. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!” he roared. Startled, they ambled away,

“There, there,” the man smiled, leaning down. “You’re Rudolph, aren’t you?”

Rudolph’s nose brightened.

“I’m Santa,” he introduced himself. “Here.” Opening his hand, he revealed a candy cane. Rudolph snatched the treat, munching hungrily. Santa laughed heartily and patted Melody. “Tell me if you have any more problems. Don’t worry. You have a beautiful son.”

* * *

Early that morning, Rudolph woke to see Whipper hovering over him. “Hello, Rudolph,” he greeted warmly.

Rudolph looked up into the buck’s eyes. “What is it?” he asked.

Whipper smiled, “I was just wondering how your trip went.”

“Fine,” Rudolph replied. An image of the past flashed before his eyes. Rudolph, the red-nosed outcast, lay crying in the snow. Several fawns danced around him, jeering. “Come on, let’s get him!” ordered the pack’s leader, Whipper. The memory faded and Rudolph was back in the present.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Not particularly,” Rudolph answered suspiciously. “What are you fishing for?”

“Nothing,” Whipper shook his head. “Can’t we forget the old days? I was young and reckless. No harm meant.”

Rudolph considered. Forgiving Whipper would be a huge weight off his chest. But he had to prove himself. "I'll think about it," he said.

"You won't be disappointed!" promised Whipper eagerly.

Chapter Three

"Did you get anywhere?" asked Zicus when Whipper returned from his escapade to Rudolph's stall.

"Yeah, he bought it, hook, line, and sinker," gloated Whipper. "He even offered to put me on trial."

"Good. Gaining Rudolph's trust is our only guarantee that we won't be accused after you-know-what happens."

"You're right, as usual," Whipper sighed. "But I just thought of a glitch in our plan. Aren't people going to wonder where *I* am when I take over for Rudolph?"

"Good point," smiled Zicus. "But you see, I've already thought of that. First of all, nobody really cares about us anyway. In fact, they're all quite happy to pretend we don't exist. So if I build a little stall adjacent to my house, we can pretend you're living in it. Second, if anybody *does* get really suspicious, I can fake your death. Nobody will come to your funeral, so I can simply dig up some dirt and erect a cross."

"What would I do without you," grinned Whipper.

"Well, you certainly wouldn't be able to carry out your scheme," chuckled Zicus. "In the meantime, spend your daylight hours here. Soon everyone will be used to you being here all the time. I'll start on the stall right away."

"You won't mind my constant company for awhile?" queried Whipper.

"Not a bit," Zicus assured him.

Suddenly, they heard a knock on the door. Both the reindeer and elf jumped, hoping the visitor hadn't been eavesdropping.

Heart racing, Zicus answered the door. "Hello?"

It was Elvington, the messenger elf. "Good day, Sir Zicus. I have instructions to escort Whipper to St. Nicholas's cottage. He has an important matter to discuss with the foresaid reindeer."

A lump formed in Whipper's throat. Santa had found out!

Following the small elf, he arrived at the cottage where Santa beckoned Whipper inside.

The big man's sparkling blue eyes filled Whipper with guilt. "Let me explain, sir," Whipper pleaded.

"Explain what?" he asked kindly. "And don't call me 'sir'. Call me 'father' like all the other reindeer and elves do. Why don't you let me explain why I called you to my cottage, first? After that, if you still have a concern I'd be happy to hear it."

"Okay," Whipper gulped.

"I invited you to find out if you would like to become Comet's sub. You know, for when he's sick and can't possibly fly for Christmas. Comet's old sub is getting quite elderly and has asked to retire. Think about it, Whipper! Now, maybe you too can be a

part of pulling the sleigh!” Santa concluded, patting the reindeer on his back. “So, what’s your answer?”

Whipper thought for a moment. He was about to say yes when he remembered. He was going to be *Rudolph*! Never mind about being some sappy sub for Comet.

Whipper shook his head. “I like hanging out with Zicus too much,” he lied, “I just couldn’t leave him. Training would take up too much of my time. Thank you for your offer, anyway. But I gave up longing to be a sleigh reindeer long ago.”

The old man sighed. “Well, if that’s how you feel, then of course you’re under no obligation. But, I was so sure you would jump at the chance!”

Whipper smiled to himself. A few days ago, he would have. “Sorry, sir—I mean, father. I know you’ll have no problem finding a replacement. Can I go now? Zicus is waiting.”

Nodding, Santa smiled. “Good-bye, my dear Whipper. Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year!” Whipper replied.

“Oh, and what was that you wanted to take to me about?”

“It’s nothing,” Whipper answered quickly. “Nothing at all.”

Turning around, he headed out the door and let out a huge sigh of relief. For now, his plans remained a secret.

* * *

The nose that Zicus had been working on was finally finished. It looked *exactly* like Rudolph’s. *It’s even better than I had hoped*, the elf thought excitedly.

Like Rudolph’s nose, it was round and about the size of an elf’s first. Also like Rudolph’s, it had a light inside it that glowed when you were feeling good. Whipper was delighted.

“You’re a genius, Zicus!” he grinned gleefully. “It’s perfect.”

Zicus smiled with pleasure. “I’m glad you’re pleased.”

Whipper tried the nose on. It fit perfectly, and felt like a nose warmer. “It’s very warm and soft inside!” Whipper commented gratefully.

“Yes,” Zicus nodded. “I wanted to make it so comfortable that you would actually enjoy wearing it.”

Whipper beamed. “You think of everything!”

* * *

The winter passed by quickly for Whipper and Zicus, for they had so much to look forward to.

At last, the final hour before the famous flight of Christmas Eve had arrived. Zicus walked over to the sleigh to perform his annual job of harnessing. All the reindeer were lined up, pawing with anticipation.

After quite a bit of tightening and loosening, Zicus finally reached Rudolph.

Carefully he buckled the lead deer’s harness, and secretly ensured that one of the straps was left undone. At last he was finished. Rudolph wiggled this way and that.

“Hey, my harness actually feels more comfortable than usual!” Rudolph told the elf. “Thanks, Zicus!”

“You’re welcome,” replied Zicus, hiding a wicked grin.

* * *

Gold, orange, and pink rays splashed across the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. Dainty snowflakes softly twirled in the light breeze, falling to the frozen earth. All was quiet, the silence only broken by the impatient pawing of hooves. Elves scurried to and fro, making last-minute checks and alterations.

As soon as the sled was loaded, Santa arrived. The jolly old man’s eyes sparkled with joy as he climbed onto the sleigh.

“Ho, ho, ho!” his voice rang out like silver bells. “Merry Christmas! Now comes the hour to lead us forth! Fly, Rudolph! On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, on Vixen. On Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen!”

Rising into the frosty air, the sled slipped silently away fading into the mist. Mile after mile flew by.

Suddenly, the sleigh lurched and a cry broke the stillness.

“What’s happening?” Dasher shouted.

“The harness—it’s slipping!” Rudolph replied frantically.

“What’s going on?” St. Nick thundered.

“Rudolph’s slipping!” shrieked Dasher. “Do something!”

Suddenly, the leather gave way and Rudolph disappeared from view, plunging down into the thick forest. Everything went black.

* * *

“*Nooooo!*” shouted Santa in horror as Rudolph plummeted into the darkness. Thoughts raced through his mind. Never before had anything so terrible happened to his team. Should he disappoint the boys and girls waiting all over the world, or leave his best friend behind? He had only a moment to decide. *I’ll finish delivering the presents, he thought, and then head back to look for him. If I can’t find him, I’ll return home. Maybe Rudolph will have somehow found his way back by then.* Informing the team of his decision, Santa Claus reluctantly led his troop on.

Chapter Four

A few hours later, Rudolph woke to a pounding head. His light was flickering—not a good sign. “Where am I?” he mumbled. Suddenly, it all came back to him. The slipping, the crash. He shivered, trying to get up, but his legs buckled. One was severely injured. *Maybe I can limp. I’ve got to try. If I can’t find a place to stay for the night, I’ll freeze to death,* he thought.

Gathering strength, he stood up and winced. As he hobbled slowly through the trees, a glimmer of light caught his eye. Hope rose in his heart. It wasn’t long before he arrived at a small cottage. A blazing fire burned brightly inside. Moaning, Rudolph

crashed to the ground just outside the door. His energy was gone. *I hope they heard me*, he thought.

Click! The front door of the cottage opened. Out popped a boy of about eight. His face was kind, causing Rudolph's nose to brighten a little bit.

"Rudolph?" he asked in disbelief. "Is it really you? What are you doing way out here? Why aren't you delivering presents with Santa?"

Rudolph whimpered and tried to stand, but his one leg hung limply.

"You're hurt, you poor thing. I've got to help you get inside the stable for the night. Then my Dad can fix you all up in the morning," comforted the kid.

Careful not to hurt the special reindeer, the boy gently stroked his fur.

Soon, the door opened again. This time it was a full grown man, followed by a woman. "What's up, Matt?" the man asked. Spotting Rudolph, he frowned. "You know you're not supposed to pet wild animals."

"Careful!" the woman gasped. "It might hurt you!"

"It's okay, mom," Matt reassured her. "It's Rudolph. Somehow, he must have fallen out of Santa's sleigh."

"Rudolph?" questioned the father. "What makes you think he's Rudolph?"

"Take a good look at his nose," Matt invited.

His father bent down and stared. Traces of light could be seen flickering from the reindeer's nose. The man rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

"He's hurt, Dad. Do you see his leg?" motioned Matt. "That's why his nose isn't shining. Right, Rudolph?"

Rudolph nodded.

"We've simply *got* to look after him until he's well enough to get back to the North Pole!" he pleaded.

"Well, I don't know, son," replied his father slowly. Exchanging glances, the couple sighed together, "Well, we don't know that he's Rudolph, but he seems gentle. We'll keep him for a night, and after that we'll just have to see."

"Yippee!" Matt cheered softly.

"Meanwhile, Matt, you'd better hurry up and climb into bed. You want Santa Claus to come, don't you?" asked his mother.

"Yes, mom," the boy beamed. "I'll go to bed as long as dad promises to put Rudolph in the stable.

"I promise," his dad smiled.

When Matt had gone indoors, the man helped Rudolph into the stable. His stall was very comfortable, with fresh, soft hay to lie on. The water trough dripped with crisp, cool water, while mashed oats filled a nearby bucket.

"I don't know what domestic reindeers eat," the man laughed. "But I'm sure you'll like horses' food. I wonder if you really are Rudolph."

The reindeer's nose glowed brighter. The man's eyes widened. "Well, I'll be jiggered," he finally whispered.

Turning away, he quietly shut the stable door and went to bed.

* * *

Sparrows were twittering and squirrels chattering when Rudolph awoke the next morning. Stiff and sore from his fall, he stood up and stretched his three good legs. Slurping some of his water, he thought about the events of the previous night. What had caused his slip from the harness? It had certainly never happened before. He started. Maybe Zicus was somehow responsible! But he hadn't a shred of proof; the answers would just have to wait until he got back to the North Pole.

Shuffling across the barn, Rudolph pushed on the doors. Slowly but surely, they creaked open, and he walked into the open sunshine. The little cottage beside the stable was quiet. Only a little trail of smoke could be seen seeping out of the chimney. It reminded Rudolph of Santa Claus' cottage, and he felt a pang of loneliness.

A little while later, a face peeked out the door. "Rudolph!" Matt called. "I'm so glad you didn't run away! You should see what Santa brought!" He held up a bright red sled and a new pair of skates.

Rudolph's eyes sparkled, misting over with tears. Santa's mission hadn't failed!

Matt was joined by his father. Gently, the man took a bandage and started wrapping it around Rudolph's sprained leg. It was nice and snug—not too tight, and not too loose.

Rudolph tested it out by taking a few short steps. Opening his mouth to thank the two, he suddenly held back. Fear entered his heart as he realized just how close he had come to making a terrible mistake. Santa had warned all the reindeer that if they were ever caught by humans, never to reveal they could speak. The sound of Santa's voice echoed in his head, "Remember, you are not circus animals. If humans discover you have speech, they will enslave you for their own profit. Hold your tongue if you value your life. Act dumb and witless."

Rudolph moved close to Matt and rubbed up softly against him.

"That must be reindeer language for thanks!" grinned the boy. "Hey dad, aren't you going to treat his cuts, too?"

"Of course, Matt. I was just getting to that," his father replied.

The man took a bottle out of his pocket. It was filled with a clear liquid.

"This is going to hurt, poor fellow!" he warned as he patted Rudolph's side. Carefully, he poured some on each of Rudolph's sores. It stung severely, but Rudolph refrained from yelping, and waited patiently for the man to finish. After the man applied the last drop, Rudolph gave one final shudder.

"It's alcohol," explained the man, as if Rudolph was a human. "It will prevent your sores from getting infected."

Rudolph made a sort of nod.

"How strange, you act as if you almost understand," smiled Matt's father. He moved towards Rudolph's head. "Now, I think it's time to pull that berry off your nose so you can breathe properly."

"No, dad!" the boy warned. "Remember, Rudolph's nose is a big, red bulb that glows. He's sick, so that's why his nose isn't shining. Please don't try or you'll really hurt him!"

"Now, Matt," the man sighed. "I hate to tell you this, but it can't be Rudolph. After all, Santa came last night and you know that would have been impossible without his lead deer!"

Making a grunting noise, Rudolph pawed at the ground to show he disagreed.

“See?” Matt laughed. “Rudolph just said ‘you’re wrong’ in reindeer language!” Shaking his head, the man tugged slightly on Rudolph’s nose. The poor reindeer bleated.

“No, dad!” Matt insisted. “You’re hurting him!”

“That’s strange,” his father said. “That berry actually is glued on!”

“See!” Matt grinned triumphantly. “It *is* his nose. Pull it any harder, and we’re really going to be in trouble.”

The man stared at Rudolph’s nose once more, shook his head and finally walked away.

Chapter Five

Ten months had come and gone since Rudolph’s fatal disappearance. All of Santa’s search parties failed. Gloom hung over the North Pole like a dark cloud. The reindeer, old and young alike clustered together whispering dark secrets. Would sleigh reindeer ever be safe again? Could this tragedy repeat itself? What had happened to Rudolph? Could Santa really be trusted? After all, he had abandoned Rudolph in his hour of greatest need, and then failed to find him.

Even the elves seemed to have lost their joy. As they worked, the tapping of their hammers and whir of machines seemed to flood the workshop with despair. When problems arose, as they always did, the elves snapped and grumbled.

Santa locked himself away in his little cottage and refused to speak with anyone. Written messages were sent in and out with his food trays regarding children’s wish lists. The rest of the time he stared out the window moping over the loss of his best friend, Rudolph.

Ever since Rudolph’s disappearance became public, Zicus and Whipper had holed up in Zicus’ shack. Together, they were experimenting on Whipper’s fur. Day after day, the old elf brushed Whipper’s fur trying to make it gleam like silver.

“You’re rubbing so hard, I’m not going to have any skin left!” Whipper yowled.

“Do you want to look like Rudolph or not?” snarled Zicus. “No pain, no gain.”

“Ahhh-rooo!” howled Whipper, grimacing as Zicus finished.

“Oh, fiddlesticks!” groaned Zicus, wiping his brow. “All this brushing, and your fur’s still not as shiny as Rudolph’s! Your color is right though. Thankfully, that hair dye fixed it.”

Rubbing his hands together, Zicus smiled. “I have a surprise for you, Whipper!”

“Not another one!” Whipper protested. “Sounds like one of your experiments. Is it?”

“Let me show you,” said Zicus as he went to a cupboard and pulled out a package wrapped in brown paper. Excitedly, the elf tore off the wrapping and presented his prize to Whipper.

“It’s a can of Permanent Sparkling Fur Foam®!” Zicus grinned. “Guaranteed to make your fur shinier than Rudolph’s!”

Whipper eyed it suspiciously. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course not!” Zicus denied, hurt.

“Well, that hair dye burnt my skin to a crisp!” Whipper reminded worriedly. “And you promised *that* wouldn’t hurt, either! You go first and if it doesn’t hurt you, then I’ll give it a shot.”

Zicus looked alarmed. “Well, it says right here on the bottle that it’s for fur but I have hair,” he choked.

“Well, if you won’t try it, neither will I,” said Whipper setting his jaw. There was a long pause.

“All right then, I’ll do it,” agreed Zicus. He took the lid off the can, sprayed foam all over his hair, and began to massage his scalp.

“Does it hurt? Don’t it hurt?” Whipper pressed.

Zicus was silent. “No,” he replied finally. “It does not.”

Covering his hair with a shower cap, Zicus set the timer for half an hour and waited for the chemical to set in.

Ding! The bell rang after an intense wait.

“Let me see!” Whipper begged.

Slowly, Zicus removed the cap and they both stared into the mirror. Whipper broke the silence first with a yelp of joy.

“Wow! I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes!” he shouted as a smile spread across his face from ear to ear. “You’re hair sparkles more than Santa’s Magic Dust! Spray it on my back, Zicus, before I lose my nerve!”

Half an hour later, there was one very happy reindeer, and one very miserable elf.

“What’s the matter, Zicus?” asked Whipper, admiring his gleaming fur in the mirror.

“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind for the rest of my life,” Zicus lamented. “I’ll be the laughing stock of the North Pole! Why, I look like a Christmas ornament!”

Chapter Six

Three nights before Christmas Eve, Zicus peeked out the front door of his shack. Gleaming, the moon shimmered from behind a shroud of clouds casting eerie shadows over the frozen hills. The coast was clear!

“Psst, Whipper! Hurry up!” hissed Zicus.

“I’m not going,” came a stubborn voice, “and you can’t make me!”

“Then you can just forget about replacing Rudolph!” retorted Zicus. “I should’ve known you’d jam out in the end. After all my work! What’s the trouble now?”

“I’m not telling,” pouted Whipper.

“Let me guess,” muttered Zicus. Several minutes passed. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

Whipper was quiet.

“Well, what is it?” groaned the grumpy old elf as he shut the door. “Spit it out!”

“Cold is one thing, but the DARK is quite another!” quaked Whipper.

“Let me get this straight. All this time we worked on finding a way for you to deliver presents on Christmas Eve, and you never bothered mentioning that you’re afraid of THE DARK?” roared Zicus. The silence was deafening.

Whipper tucked his tail between his hind legs and hung his head in misery. The clock ticked softly as Zicus drummed his fingers impatiently on the table.

Suddenly, Zicus snapped his fingers and grinned. “That’s it!” Bending down beside Whipper’s nose, he flipped a tiny switch. Click! Instantly, the room flooded with light.

“So much for your excuses!” laughed the elf. “You’re brighter than the moon. Now, out you go before you come up something else.”

Whipper dug his hooves into the floor. But Zicus shoved him out and slammed the door, leaving Whipper alone in the snow.

“Well, I guess there’s no going back now,” thought Whipper staring unhappily at the locked door. He turned slowly and stole quietly away into the dark. Guided by his nose, he headed beyond Santa’s property, and soon passed into the forbidden region beyond where no living creatures dwelt.

* * *

At midnight, the sky cleared and a bitter wind arose. Whipper shivered and looked up at the silvery stars dusting the sky. Standing there in the emptiness, a frightening thought rose up in his heart. *Is Rudolph dead? I wonder if he died all alone in a place like this?* Shuddering, Whipper stuffed the idea back down and turned his attention to finding shelter. There was none.

He spent the wee hours of the night wandering aimlessly in circles trying to squelch his rising doubts. At long last the moon faded, and although the endless dark remained unbroken, Whipper knew his time had come.

Cantering towards the flickering lights of Santa’s village, Whipper made his way back across the forbidden zone. “How hard can it be to lead?” Whipper mulled the thought over, turning it around in his mind like a song. Then it was followed by a second, stronger thought which replaced the first. “I’m going to get to *fly*, and *this time I’ll* be the hero!” Eyes brightening, the reindeer’s pace quickened with anticipation. He tossed his head and pranced the way he’d seen Rudolph do so many times before. Shining, he stood before the gate and faced the pasture dotted with reindeer.

Chapter Seven

Lights flashing, a police cruiser rolled up the dirt road and stopped in front of the Bruin’s log cabin.

“Dad!” Matt called. “Constable Davies is at the door! And his lights are on!”

Jim opened the door to greet his old friend. “What’s with the lights?”

“This isn’t a friendly visit,” Davies said. “I’d like to come, in if I could.”

“Sure,” shrugged Jim, opening the door wider.

Constable Davies took off his shoes and made his way to the kitchen table. “Seems there’s trouble brewing over here,” he began. Matt edged his way closer to the kitchen and stood quietly.

“Trouble?” Jim asked, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you know Victor. He never minds his own business, but he claims to have a point this time.”

“What now?” groaned Jim. Victor was the Bruin family’s closest neighbor. The two shared property along the creek, and water rights caused no end of tension between the two ranchers. “I’ve stayed away from his side of the creek and given him everything he’s demanded!” he protested.

“It’s not the water this time,” interrupted the police officer. “This time, he claims you’re illegally harboring Santa’s lead reindeer, Rudolph. Apparently, the creature’s glowing nose can be seen from his living room as the animal goes to get a drink.” He chuckled. “This has to be Victor’s most ridiculous accusation yet. He even has a photograph to back up his story. Heaven knows he probably got it off the Internet.”

Jim gulped, laughing nervously. “Rudolph, as in the reindeer? You’ve got to be kidding! So, what are you going to do?”

“Look around your property, so I can shut Victor up once and for all.”

“Do what you need to do,” agreed Jim, laughing. “Maybe you’ll even find Santa!”

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” grinned Constable Davies in response. “That man must spend half his time thinking up ways to drive me crazy!”

* * *

This was not the first time Rudolph had seen a police cruiser. As a matter of fact, the first year home alarms were implemented, Santa had barely escaped the clutches of police officers all over North America and Europe. In Buffalo, New York, the police were tipped off and actually managed to nab Santa in the living room of the famous multi-millionaire, Ken Livingston. Rudolph shuddered. *If I hadn’t put a hole through that roof and rescued Santa, who knows what would have happened?* It had taken the elves an entire year to create a suit which shielded Santa from the alarm systems’ motion detectors.

The sound of the Bruin’s front door closing snapped Rudolph back to the present. Police meant danger. In a flash, Rudolph knew what he had to do. The Bruin’s had been kind, but now they were all at risk. His leg was healed, and he felt sleek and strong. It was time to leave. Leaping over the fence, Rudolph raced into the deep forest, heading north.

* * *

Two days journey brought him to the edge of a deep valley. Dusk crept over the wilderness, etching the silhouettes of lodgepole pines against the sky. Across the winding river, an endless chain of mountains gleamed in the descending sun. Viewing the vast expanse, loneliness engulfed Rudolph. A great longing for home filled his heart. *Will I ever see Santa again?* He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. Suddenly, a voice, as clear as bells, echoed in his mind. *You’re set apart, Rudolph. You always were—and it’s*

more than your nose. It's called courage, my friend—the courage to lead. Shaking his antlers, Rudolph reared up and pawed at the air. *Thank-you, Santa! No one's ever believed in me like you. I won't let you down!*

Hunger gnawed at his belly. Plunging down the gully, Rudolph searched the rocks for lichen in the dwindling light. His eyes lit up as he discovered a small patch. Hungrily, he began wolfing it down, all the while cocking his ears and lifting his head to sniff the breezes for danger.

Suddenly, Rudolph heard a rustle coming from a nearby clump of alder bushes. He froze and stared. Two soft brown eyes peeked through the branches.

“Rudolph?” asked a gentle voice.

“Yes?”

“What are *you* doing way out here?” it questioned.

“It's a long story,” he sighed.

She stepped out of the shadows, and Rudolph gazed in wonder as he stared at her delicate hooves and arched neck. *Another reindeer!* His breath came in tiny wisps.

“I've got time,” she said softly.

“Last Christmas Eve, somehow the harness slipped mid-flight, and I dropped out of the sky,” he began sadly. “These scars are from when I fell.”

Together they walked through the moonlight as Rudolph related all he had faced over the past year.

“It's not really as bad as you think,” he finished. “Santa once granted me two magical wishes. I haven't used either yet; I've been waiting for the right time. I've been thinking that I could use one to make me fly, so I can get back to the North Pole and use the other one to erase the scars.”

At last, the pair stood silently over the winding river valley.

Suddenly, a thunderous voice shattered the stillness.

“So *that's* where you went!”

Rudolph whirled around in surprise and found himself nose to nose with an angry buck.

“Who's *this*, Fauna?” he snapped, and then paused. Staring in wonder, the buck took a long look and whistled. “Nice nose job, bud. Who do you think you are? Rudolph?”

“Be quiet, Buck,” Fauna snapped. “This *is* Rudolph, and he needs our help.”

“Ha! Moving in on my girl, and now you want me to help him? Nice try, but I don't think so. Fauna's mine. Get lost, Rudolph—before somebody gets hurt!”

“I'm not your property!” Fauna retorted.

“You stay out of this!” the buck thundered, lowering his antlers to charge.

There was a near miss as Rudolph stepped nimbly to the side and lowered his own rack in response. Attacking from the left, he sent the buck sprawling down the river bank and onto the ice below. He was just about to strike down the bank to finish things off when Fauna shrieked, “Wait!”

In the distance came a howl. It was joined by another and another until a complete chorus echoed through the hills. Motionless, the pair stood paralyzed.

Below them, Buck scrambled to the edge of the river, stared wildly about, and took off like a shot.

The baying gradually faded away. “What should we do?” hissed Fauna.

“Wait and watch!” commanded Rudolph. Arching his neck, he faced the darkness fearlessly, protecting Fauna’s flank.

Fauna turned to look in the opposite direction.

Soon two yellow eyes flickered nearby. Gleaming, they pierced the night and crept closer.

“How many?” Rudolph barked.

“Ten, maybe twelve,” whispered Fauna.

The pack stole out of the brush, encircling them. Eyes flashing, the wolves bared their teeth, growling and snapping.

Trembling, Fauna held her ground. All at once, a searing pain ignited in her hind leg. Yelping, she stumbled forward. As if on signal, two wolves leapt to drive the two reindeer apart.

Rudolph wheeled. Stunned, he choked back his fury at the fierce creatures which now surrounded Fauna.

He bellowed angrily, swerving to avoid a set of flashing teeth. Temper flaming, Rudolph spun and tossed the wolf with his antlers. Plunging, it fell, screaming, over the bank to the sharp rocks beneath.

This diversion gave Rudolph the split second he needed to try and help Fauna. Turning, he saw to his horror that she was being forced by the pack towards the cliff. There was no time to act. And then it came to him—the same clear voice cutting through his thoughts once again.

“Your wishes, Rudolph!”

“What?”

“It’s time.”

“For what?”

“Use your wishes before it’s too late.”

Snarling, the wolves clamored about Fauna pushing her so close to the edge that dirt and rocks fell, crumbling, away beneath her hind legs.

“Fly, Fauna!” thundered Rudolph as hope swelled within his heart.

In a flash, the two soared upward. Leaping, the wolves launched themselves into the air, barely missing Fauna’s delicate hooves. They yowled helplessly.

Fauna gazed with wonder into Rudolph’s eyes.

“I can’t believe you used your last wish on me!”

“Come on! Let’s get out of here!” cried Rudolph.

“Which way?”

“North, of course!” Rudolph replied. “Follow that star!”

Gliding through a cloud, Fauna shivered in the dampness.

“That was kind of wet,” Rudolph smiled. “Maybe we should fly under the next one.”

“Please,” agreed Fauna.

Moments later, they approached another cloud.

“Dive!” shouted Rudolph.

Dropping straight down, he laughed out loud. “Did you feel that?”

“You *like* having your stomach in your throat?” choked Fauna.

“Why not?” Rudolph grinned.

All of a sudden, he flipped a complete 360°. Legs windmilling, he sang out with glee, “Woo-hoo! That was a blast!”

“What on earth are you *doing*?” Fauna gasped in astonishment.

“You have to remember that I’ve never flown without a harness before. I’m just checking things out! Now it’s your turn,” he challenged.

Fauna tucked a perfect backwards somersault.

“Wow—you’re good!” Rudolph admired.

“Thanks, Rudolph,” Fauna smiled shyly. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

During the daylight, the pair grazed on whatever moss could still be found and rested quietly. To avoid being seen, they flew at night. Time whizzed by and they eventually neared the North Pole. Fighting through bitter winds and swirling snow became a daily battle. If it hadn’t been for Rudolph’s fearless leadership, Fauna would never have had the courage to press on.

Chapter Eight

Ignoring the “DO NOT DISTURB” sign on Santa’s front door, Elvin the head elf, barged into Santa’s cottage.

Eyebrows bristling at the interruption, Santa stared out the window, refusing to look up.

“Snap out of it, Santa!” Elvin ordered. “The sleigh will be arriving back from General Motors any time now. We’ve got to review the new technology. And it has to be tonight!”

Santa sighed.

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, Santa! You’ve *got* to stop pining for Rudolph and blaming yourself once and for all! It wasn’t your fault—it was a terrible accident!”

“You have no idea what this has done to me!” whispered Santa. “I broke trust with my best friend and it cost him his life. Now, I don’t think any of the reindeer will ever trust me again. Can’t you understand? The whole thing’s hopeless.”

“That’s not true. I still believe in you, Santa,” said Elvin softly. “And since I don’t blame you, I’m sure there’s others that don’t, too. Everyone’s just waiting to see what you’ll do next.”

“But I don’t know what to do,” said Santa.

“Forgive,” answered Elvin.

“Forgive who?”

“Yourself,” replied Elvin. “If you don’t stop holding yourself responsible, Christmas will be ruined! All over the world children and adults alike rely on your merry spirit and giving heart. Everyone experiences suffering and fails at one time or another. These are the times when we have to make a choice. To despair—or to let go and hope again.”

Santa was silent.

“You’ve never had something like this happen before,” continued Elvin. “I have. Remember when my beloved Elvalynn passed away? I thought I would never get over it.” A look of tenderness swept over the old elf’s face. “You impart undying hope to a dark world through your gifts. Do you really want that to end?”

All was still. Santa did not move.

“I’ll be in the technology department waiting for the sleigh, if you change your mind,” said Elvin rising to his feet. His quiet footsteps faded away after the front door clicked shut behind him.

Santa watched as his old friend disappeared into the snowy evening.

* * *

Trudging through the snow, Elvin’s shoulders slumped. *I wonder what it will take for Santa to change his mind*, he thought wearily. Beep! Beep! Beep! Interrupting his thoughts came the sharp sound of his walkie-talkie.

“Yes, Elvis?” Elvin answered.

“According to our radar, the sleigh is due to land any second,” said Elvis.

“I’ll be right there,” Elvin grinned.

Moments later, the ancient elf watched as the sleigh broke through the heavy clouds, lighting the dark sky. Its slow descent set off the automated voice of the motion detectors. “All personnel clear the landing pad.”

Hanging from the sky as if by a silky thread, Elvin watched with satisfaction as the sleigh landed precisely where it belonged. “There’s just nothing like Santa’s fairy dust,” smiled Elvin. “Now to deal with Mr. Thomas Richardson—C.E.O. of General Motors.”

“A tall figure stepped from the sleigh, locked eyes with Elvin, and extended his hand.

“Welcome. It is a great privilege to finally meet you,” greeted the elf. “Now, hold on to the North Pole, and we’ll get you in out of the cold.”

“The North Pole?” asked Mr. Richardson, craning his neck.

“Yes, sir,” chuckled Elvin, motioning to a gleaming silver pole on the landing pad. “There actually is a North Pole, and this is it.”

“Well, I never...”

The two grabbed hold of the pole to steady themselves as the platform began to sink. There was a slight click as the platform locked into place on the first level.

“Now for the contract, Thomas,” said Elvin, motioning towards a thick document which lay on an elaborately carved roll top desk. “By signing it, you finalize our agreement.”

The tall man sat down, pulled up a chair, and began to read. Half an hour later, he lifted his head. “I’m ready to sign.”

“You understand that your signature means you promise never to disclose anything about Santa’s workshop to anyone under any circumstance. Should you break your word, neither you nor your family nor any of your descendants will ever receive another Christmas present from Santa. It is also possible that such actions may have consequences that even we cannot predict. Some of us believe this would result in the destruction of Christmas forever.”

Thomas swallowed, took the pen Elvin offered, and signed.

“Now for yours,” said the C.E.O. “We at General Motors have agreed to grant you the use of our On-Star satellite technology for a fleet of ten users. Our technology

must be used for Christmas business only. On our side, we will guard your privacy and not use the technology to track or sell your global position to anyone.

“You have my word,” replied Elvin as he signed the agreement and handed over a money order for one million dollars USD.

The C.E.O. offered his hand to the elf, and they shook on the agreement.

“Step back onto the platform and hang onto the North Pole! You’re about to enter the Technology Room!” cried Elvin, his eyes glimmering.

Mr. Richardson took a deep breath and held onto the pole as the platform kicked into life, taking them down to the next level.

* * *

“Do you see what I see?” gasped Cupid.

“What?” queried Blitzen, craning his neck.

“Look, over there! Across the field towards the forbidden lands...” whispered Cupid.

Eyes widening, Blitzen stared. “Rudolph? It can’t be! I don’t believe it!” Hooves thundering, the two reindeer flew through the field.

Skidding to a halt, they shouted, “Is it really you, Rudolph?”

“Hey, fellas! I’ve missed you,” Whipper grinned, sending tiny puffs of air into the night sky.

“It’s a miracle! You’ve arrived home just in time for Christmas Eve. Zicus is just about to harness the team. Are you well enough to lead?” asked Blitzen.

“Absolutely! I can’t wait to see Santa’s face!”

“Neither can we. Come on!”

* * *

“Well, that about covers it,” said Santa. “You’re a good friend, Thomas.”

Suddenly, the door flew open to reveal a panting red-faced elf.

“Santa!” he choked.

“What is it this time, Elwin? I gave strict orders that there were to be *no* interruptions.”

“But Santa! Rudolph’s back!”

Santa rose to his feet, and then sank back again. “Rudolph,” he murmured in disbelief. “It can’t be!”

“Well it is, and his nose still works, *and* he says he wants to lead. Tonight. Zicus just hitched him up. He’s waiting for you to give the okay.” Elwin stamped his feet impatiently. “Hurry up!”

“What is going on?” asked the CEO.

“Not now,” interrupted Santa. “Elvin, show Mr. Richardson out. I’ve got to see Rudolph.”

Shutting the door behind him, Santa turned to face Elwin. “What do you mean he’s back?”

“Just that. Zicus went to harness up the team, and there he was, pawing his hooves—nose glowing—wanting to know where you were.”

“Well, didn’t he say where he’s been all this time?”

“Nope. Not a word. Just kept asking for you.”

Moments later the pair arrived at the sleigh. Eight gleaming reindeer stood patiently waiting. At the front of the team was Rudolph.

“Santa!”

“Rudolph!” exclaimed Santa as his eyes misted over. “Where have you been, my friend?”

“It’s a long story. Can it wait ‘til tomorrow? We’ve got a job to do, and I intend to do it,” replied Whipper, tossing his head.

“Your voice sounds different, Rudolph,” said Santa. “Are you ill?”

Heart hammering, Whipper paused as he searched for an answer. “Uh—just the tail end of a cold,” he stammered. “Nothing that a good night’s work won’t cure.”

“Well, then, let’s go!” grinned Santa as he plopped himself into the sleigh and picked up the reins.

“On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, on Vixen! On Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen! Go Rudolph!”

Surging into the night sky, the team headed toward its first stop.

Chapter Nine

“Well, we’re finally here!” exclaimed Rudolph as the pair gazed down at the pole.

“So there really is a North Pole after all,” mused Fauna.

“Yup! Now just step right on the platform and we’ll get you out of the cold. It’s Christmas Eve, and I’ve got a full night’s work ahead of me.”

Silently, the platform began to sink. With a click it locked into place, revealing the elves gathered around a miniature piano and singing “Jolly Old St. Nicholas.” It was their annual Christmas party.

“Elvin!” shouted Rudolph over the noise. Whirling, the spry old elf dropped his glass and let out a gasp. “Who are you?”

“Who *am* I?” thundered Rudolph.

“Well, aren’t you Rudolph?” glared Fauna.

“Of course!” the reindeer protested. Suddenly, the music stopped and every elf’s eye was immediately fixed upon the two reindeer.

* * *

High in the sky, Whipper was quaking in his harness. Dizzying heights with jagged mountain peaks and sharp needled lodge pole pines stretched in all directions. Glancing down, he trembled. No one could survive a fall from that height. Rudolph must have died last Christmas. *That makes me a murderer!*

Preoccupied with guilt and fear, Whipper didn’t notice the large cloud ahead.

“Rudolph!” shouted Santa. “Go under clouds, not through them! We don’t want to get the presents wet!”

“Sorry Santa,” Whipper replied, scolding himself for being so careless. Rudolph would never make such a mistake.

At last, twinkling lights of the first house's Christmas bulbs shimmered through the mist.

"Now, Rudolph!" boomed Santa.

Lurching, Whipper's stomach flopped. Landing wasn't an aspect he'd considered before. *You can't do this!* his mind screamed. *I have to*, he argued.

Shutting his eyes, he crashed onto the roof, only to discover he couldn't stop. Momentum was pushing the reindeer right off the shingles!

"Help!" he shrieked, tumbling over the eaves trough.

"Rudolph!" shouted Santa. "Are you hurt?"

Whipper moaned. Suspended by the harness, he dangled upside-down in the air. Blood rushed to his head.

"I'm calling Elvin!" roared Santa, frantically pressing his OnStar buttons.

* * *

Elvin's face turned white.

"Well, if you're Rudolph, I'd like to know who's out there leading Santa's sleigh right this very minute!" he demanded.

"How should I know? I've been lost in the wilderness since last Christmas. This is not exactly the welcome home I was expecting!" snapped Rudolph.

"If you're the real Rudolph, prove it, because Zicus just finished hooking Rudolph up to the sleigh," challenged the elf.

A sick feeling washed over Rudolph. What was going on?

"Would my scars satisfy you?" he asked curtly.

"What scars?" asked Elvin.

"The ones I received from the harness when it gave way and I fell into the forest below!" replied the reindeer as he turned to let the light expose them.

A hush fell over the elves. For a minute there was total silence.

"Oh," said Elvin humbly.

Suddenly, the G.P.S. siren split the silence.

"Santa's in trouble!" shrieked the elves. Elvin sprinted towards the satellite screen and snatched the mike.

"Elvin to Santa! What's going on?" screamed the elf. The mike crackled.

"We've crashed onto the roof of the first house," groaned Santa.

"Are you hurt?" asked Elvin frantically.

"No, just shaken. But there's a problem with the sleigh. Send help now!" ordered Santa as the mike went dead.

"Santa! Santa! Come in! Come in!" shrieked Elvin. But it was no use.

Turning to Rudolph, Elvin urged, "Go, Rudolph. Santa's at the first house. You know the route."

Rudolph nodded. To the astonishment of everyone at the North Pole, he flew into the sky.

"He's flying without the sleigh!" sputtered the elves.

"Yes," said Fauna. "And so can I. Rudolph saved our lives from a pack of wolves by using his two magic wishes from Santa!"

Staring in wonder at Fauna, the elves began to cheer.

* * *

I can't finish this, thought Whipper.

"Santa?" he gulped. "I have something I need to tell you."

Santa sighed. "Don't blame yourself, Rudolph. It's my fault, really, for abandoning you last year. Jitters on your first landing aren't surprising after the fall you took."

"But Santa—"

"No, my friend. Let me finish. When I saw you slip from your harness and plummet into the darkness, I was torn in two. I didn't know whether to go look for you or finish delivering the presents. I see now I made the wrong decision. You are scarred for life, and now the reindeer don't trust me. Christmas would have been ruined forever if you had died that night. And it would have been my fault." His voice broke. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Tears of shame welled in Whipper's eyes. "No, Santa, it wasn't your fault. It was mine."

"Whatever do you mean? Of course it wasn't."

"You don't understand. I'm not Rudolph—I'm Whipper."

"Whipper?" said Santa. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Slowly and painfully, Whipper poured out his story. Santa remained silent.

"And so you know nothing of whether Rudolph survived." It was more of a statement than a question. Suddenly, Santa looked far beyond his years. His last hope vanished like a popped bubble.

"No," Whipper choked. "I don't. I'm a murderer."

At that moment, a familiar voice rang through the night sky. "I've come!"

Santa's chin snapped upwards where his eyes met a beautiful sight.

"Rudolph!" Santa cried. "You're alive!" Choking, he bent over in the sleigh and sobbed.

"And he can fly!" exclaimed the team.

"Rudolph!" brayed Whipper, relief and fear flooding him. What would Rudolph do?

Amidst their cheers, the reindeer alighted on the roof. "Crash landing, eh?"

Santa explained, and Rudolph flew down to Whipper to help him out of the harness. Whipper hung his head, refusing to look Rudolph in the eyes. Untangling the harness and lifting Whipper back up to the roof took a while. At last Rudolph spoke.

"Look, Whipper, I know why you did it. I've had a whole year to think." He laughed ruefully. "You're not the only one who knows what it feels like to be an outcast. If you remember, I used to be tormented every day too."

"And I was the worst," Whipper whispered.

"Yes," Rudolph conceded, "you were, and that's why it took me so long to forgive you. But it was my fault as much as yours. I shouldn't have been so hard-hearted. At least I had Santa to believe in me. Zicus was your only friend, and he did nothing but nurse your anger."

"That's no excuse."

"No. But what I'm trying to say is, I've let it go."

Whipper lifted his eyes. They glistened with tears.

Rudolph smiled.

“Come on, Rudolph! We don’t have much time!” called Santa.

Backing his team up, the revived old man harnessed Rudolph in Whipper’s place. Whipper climbed into the back of the sleigh, where he gratefully remained for the rest of the trip.

Twelve hours later the weary but joyful team arrived back at the Pole.

“Well, Santa,” said Rudolph. “It’s good to be home!”

“Agreed!” beamed the jolly old man.

Epilogue

For those readers who need to know what happened to Fauna, Whipper, and Zicus, this is for you. Fauna and Rudolph were married within the year and shortly afterwards Fauna gave birth to Rudy Jr. who carried on his father’s tradition of the glowing red nose. Whipper repented of his wicked ways and lived quietly for the rest of his days. Santa reoffered him Comet’s sub position, but Whipper declined. He’d had enough ‘sleigh experience’ to last a lifetime. Unfortunately, Zicus’ opinions remained unchanged. One day he left the North Pole and was never seen again.