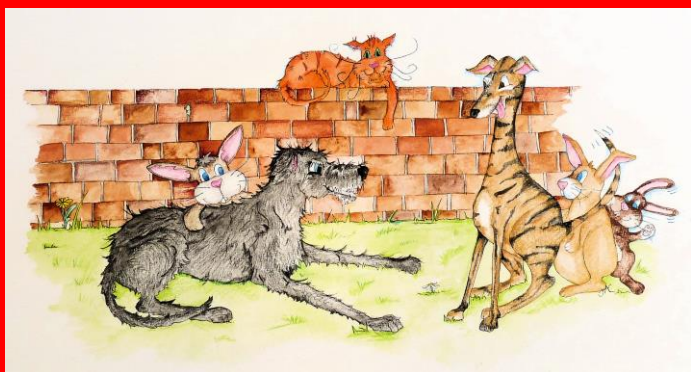


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Rubbish the Rabbit Hound
Saved Christmas

Or

Is it a Bird?
Is it a plane?
No, it's Jeffrey the flying cat!



More adventures of the strangest
rabbit you ever did see.

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Prologue

This short story is about Rubbish the Rabbit Hound (the little brindle greyhound) and his pals Jeffrey, the ancient marmalade cat, the Mighty Finn, the deerhound, his rabbit friends from the Warren and the humans he lives with, the Maid and the Butler.

On a test flight of the new sleigh Santa crash-lands in the woods and he, along with the elves and some of the reindeer, is injured. He is not going to be up to making the Xmas deliveries. Rubbish and his pals offer to step in.

Can they really do the job? Will anyone fill the Fat Red Man's boots? Will Jeffrey really be able to find the houses? Or find anywhere at all? Who could possibly stand in for Rudolph and guide the sleigh?

How Rubbish the Rabbit Hound Saved Christmas

The plump man in the red suit groaned as he moved in his upturned seat. He shook snow from his beard and hat. He could hear mumbling and the odd swear word from his companions in English, Lapp and Reindeer. The sleigh was on its side where it had landed in the deep bushes. As he looked back he could see the path of destruction where he had flown through ploughing into the small trees and shrubbery and where they had bounced off a small mound before grinding to a halt where they now lay.

“Well Santa, that was not much of a landin’,” the small figure said as he climbed gingerly from inside an elder bush next to Santa. “And I’ve done me shoulder,” the elf pointed to his left arm with his right. He leaned towards Santa who gave it a twist and popped back in with a plop. That made the elf scowl even more.

Father Christmas tried with the elf’s help to get up onto his feet. His right leg, the one he was lying on, was not pointing the right way and was hurting a lot.

“Hmmp,” the Elf said, “looks broken to me.”

“Think you’re right,” Santa agreed. He could not get up so just tried to make himself comfortable. The miserable elf (whose name was Happy would you believe) wrapped a fur blanket round Santa and handed him a bottle of aspirin.

A hairy nose peered from over the front of the sleigh. “Ay up, how are you doin' ” said Prancer. Apart from a black eye he was ok.

“The others alright?” Santa asked. Prancer shook his head. “Blitzen has a concussion and Rudolph a broken nose. It’s even redder than normal,” the reindeer added.

Happy huffed loudly. “Damage check,” he called out. There were replies of “Bruised”, “Bumped” “Twisted ankles” and “Broke an antler” from the reindeer who shook themselves out of the snow. “Where’s Trevor?” asked Happy.

“Up a tree,” Prancer pointed with a bruised hoof to where a gnome dangled from a small tree by his braces. Happy and Dancer went over and coaxed the little elf from the tree, who landed in a clump of snow. “I’ve broken a rib,” he squeaked (a strange high pitched voice even for a Gnome). As he spoke his bushy beard trembled.

“All in all”, said Santa,” It could have been a lot worse.”

Happy huffed again, “What do you mean – its 3 days to Christmas, you’ve written off the sleigh, got a broken leg, we’re two reindeer down, and our Santa Nav (that was Trevor’s job) is also unworkable.”

The fat man frowned. “Well putting it that way, we’re in a bit of a pickle.”

Rudolph stuck his head from the bushes, “Ew could say that,” he replied very nasally, holding a hanky to his very red bloody nose.

Rubbish and Scutter had been looking for berries when they first saw (and heard) the strange something flying across the sky towards them. They could make out some of the shapes including a large man in red and two other figures shouting. They appeared to be wrestling and pulling at the thing they were riding, it had flown over their heads and further into the forest. Rubbish’s eyes nearly popped out of his head with amazement as it had shot past. Scutter had ducked even though it had been at over tree height. They had heard the shouting, and then a loud crash as it had come to the ground.

“Wow,” Scutter said. “What was that?”

Rubbish smiled and, scooping the rabbit up onto his back shouted, “Let’s go and find out”. With that he ran along the snowy path into the woods, following the trail of fallen twigs and branches and bits of broken flying machine. After a short while they came upon the scene of destruction. They could see the fat man on his side, the two little people and the funny dogs with antlers.

“Can we help?” Rubbish asked coming carefully across to the gentleman. He looked very familiar but Rubbish could not think from where.

“Thank you, Rubbish,” he said. “I’m a bit stuck here. Broken leg and some of the reindeer are also injured.”

Rubbish was surprised. How did the man in red know who he was?

“Is that Scutter with you?” Santa asked. Scutter nodded in reply, also amazed that he knew who he was.

“How do you know us?” the astonished rabbit-hound asked.

“I know all of you. And that you have been a bit naughty, young Scutter, but mostly nice,” in spite of the pain he was in, Santa smiled.

Rubbish recognised the old man – he was the same as on the cards that the Maid and the Butler put on the mantelpiece at Christmas. “Excuse me sir, but are you Father Claus?”

Santa nodded. “Can you get us some help?”

Rubbish thought for a second and then replied, “I’ll go get Finn and maybe the Maid and Butler who can help get you and the reindeer out.”

Happy coughed loudly, “Not a good idea, involving humans.”

Rubbish looked curious, “Why not?”

“They are not to be trusted, and they don’t believe in Father Christmas,” the grumpy elf replied.

At that Rubbish shook his head, “You can trust the Maid and Butler. They are not like the rest of the People. They are good.”

Santa agreed, “Yes, they are. OK young Rubbish, you may go and get them.”

The reindeer had begun to unclip themselves from their harnesses now and were gathering around the sleigh, apart from Blitzen who was still bit dazed from the bump on his head.

Rubbish turned to head back to the garden.

“I’ll stay and help,” Scutter told him. I can try and get Mr Santa comfortable and get some moss to stop that deer’s nose bleeding.”

“OK called Rubbish as he sped off, “I’ll get help!” From where Santa lay he could see the greyhound give a stretch and fly off into the woods.

“Ooh, I’m cold” squeaked Trevor.

“Shurrup,” grumbled Happy. With that there was a shlumping sound and a dollop of snow slid from a branch above and landed solidly on his head.

“Thanks for that!”

Finn lay on his chaise longue (an old settee he had made his own) in the conservatory. There was Beethoven on the CD player and the old deerhound was chilling out nicely. He lay there, his shaggy grey coat making him look like a very relaxed old rug that had been laid out over the settee. If it weren’t for the occasional snore you would have been excused for not realising he was alive at all!

“What ho!” a distinctive voice full of polished rounded vowels called, making Finn raise his head. The smell of bad breath, liniment and tuna had already given Finn the clue that it was Jeffery. In

walked, joints creaking as he did so, the ancient marmalade cat. “Another wonderful day, old boy!”

Finn stirred. “Morning Jeffery,” he murmured sleepily. “Pull up a chair.”

There was a bit of puffing and wheezing as the old cat clambered up onto the armchair next to the dog.

“Rubbish about?” Jeffrey enquired.

“Out with the rabbits,” Finn answered.

These were the three musketeers, the Mighty Finn, the great big hairy deerhound, wise and as gentle as he was strong, Jeffrey the ancient marmalade cat, as brave as a lion but as creaky as a very worn old door, and Rubbish the greyhound, the largest rabbit in the woods. Rubbish had been abandoned and found by the rabbits as a small brindle-coloured puppy and had grown up thinking he was a rabbit as did they. When the rabbits asked his name, he said it must be Rubbish, as that’s what the people who threw him out had called him. Only after he met Finn did Rubbish discover he was in fact a greyhound, and together they had rescued the rabbits from the clutches of an evil old fox and his weaselly villains. Rubbish was declared to be a Rabbit hound and they protected the warren and the other animals in the forest from harm.

“He left a while ago to pick berries with Scutter. They were meeting Bramble and Daisy I think.” These were two of the youngest rabbits who followed Rubbish around adoringly. Jeffrey called them his fan club!

As they sat there, the old friends just enjoying each other’s quiet company (apart from the cat’s wheezing) there was suddenly a flash of activity across the garden. The old green door swung open and a brindle greyhound sped down the red brick path towards them. Finn sat up and Jeffrey clicked upright too. Rubbish skidded to a halt in the doorway.

“Mr Finn, Mr Finn! There’s been an accident. Its Father Claus and the deers, and some elves, he’s broken a leg, the sledge too and things. You gotta come quick!”

Finn shook his head, “Young pup, slow down, take a deep breath and start again.”

The greyhound did indeed take a very deep breath and began to explain all he had seen. Finn and Jeffrey took everything in and exchanged some quick words. “OK. I will get the Maid. Jeffrey, you go back with Rubbish and I shall organise transport and medical help.” Jeffrey reached into a pocket in his fur and pulled out an armband with a red cross on it, “No

problem Old Chap – I have my scouting First Aid badge!”

“Rubbish – I’ll meet you at the gate. I’ll just pop home to get my first aid kit.” The moggie trotted out the door and through a gap into the garden next door. By the time Rubbish had taken some more orders from Finn and walked to the garden gate Jeffrey was there with an old leather first aid kit. Jeffrey climbed onto the greyhound’s back and they trotted off down the path back towards the sleigh.

Finn sighed, “OK, here goes. How do I get them to understand me? Lassie time again!” He slid off the settee and walked into the kitchen. The Maid was busy baking and the Butler sat at the table reading the paper whilst waiting expectantly for a Welsh cake to come his way.

“Excuse me, you two,” Finn called. They turned towards him. “Just wondered, could we get out the Land rover and take a spin into the woods? Been a bit of an accident and we need transport.”

“Aw,” said the Butler, “He wants a cake! Sorry Finn, they aren’t really for dogs but I’ll see what I can do.”

The Maid smiled and threw him a piece of broken Welshcake that had been cooling on the side. Finn sighed and shook his head, "That's the problem with me speaking dog and them speaking human. They can be so dim." He did eat the piece of cake, (well, it was the polite thing to do).

Pantomime time. Finn spun around to get their full attention and did an impression of Father Christmas, a sleigh, then lay on his back waving his paw in the air in a broken and painful way.

"Aw, he's so clever," the Butler said. Finn just rolled his eyes. "They really are thick," he muttered to himself.

It was the Maid who got it, "He wants something," she said. Finn nodded. "Do you want us to follow you?" Finn nodded again, and then nudged the keys on the hook by the back door. "The Land rover?"

Finn barked. The humans scrambled about to get themselves sorted and within a few minutes they were sitting in the Land rover outside. Finn sat in the passenger seat, the Maid behind and the Butler driving.

"OK, now where," the Butler asked. Finn barked, "Follow me," and pointed his paw towards the track leading into the woods.

“Better go where he’s pointing,” the Maid said. So off they drove, two bemused people with a deerhound navigating.

In the forest Happy and Trevor had despite their injuries, managed to get the reindeer together and, using harness as a rope had pulled the sleigh upright. Santa had managed to get clear and was now propped against a tree and looking down at his mangled leg. The magic aspirin provided by the Elf Service was working and he could not feel any pain. Even when Donner (lovely girl, for a Reindeer, bit a bit dim and clumsy) had slid on the snow and fallen over him. Trevor was really concerned that it was so close to the big night and now the Big Man was injured.

“I’ll be ok,” he kept reassuring the others. “I’ll take a few aspirin.”

Happy grumbled, “Don’t be daft! Driving a sleigh whilst under the influence... Not a chance.”

Rubbish and Jeffrey bounced into the clearing, the old cat rolling off and popping up in front of Father Christmas.

“Well bless my soul,” the ginger moggie exclaimed. “Father Christmas himself!”

Santa grinned broadly, "Ah, Mr Jeffrey Jeffrey himself!"

The cat was immensely pleased that the man in red had known his full name. "It is indeed, sir. Now what can we do to help? I have bandages!"

"Bye dose is beeding," a muffled reindeer voice announced. It was Rudolph with his dripping red nose. Jeffrey went over and unwrapping what seemed like a mile of bandage, found a pad which he applied to the reindeer's nose. The bleeding soon stopped but it was clear that the reindeer's nose was broken.

"You won't be doing any directing," muttered the cheerful elf.

Rubbish looked around. "Santa, Finn is on his way, and the Maid and the Butler. They don't speak animal but you might be able to understand them. They'll get you back on your feet," then Rubbish saw the twisted leg. "Or maybe not..."

They could hear the sound of an engine coming, the rough diesel rumbling and crunch of snow and twigs being crushed under heavy wheels. In a few minutes the old green Land rover appeared over the brow and made its way down the track.

As Finn guided the Land rover through the snow along the pathway the Butler and Maid had been amazed by the long line of destruction, with the broken branches and bits of wood from the sleigh, “Whatever happened here?” the Butler asked his wife.

The Maid shook her head, “I’ve no idea but I’d guess it was a small plane. It was incredible that Finn knew and also knew to fetch us.”

Finn grinned. “He’s a clever old boy,” the Maid added, ruffling his head.

“Someone has got to be,” the deerhound mumbled to himself.

There was a low mound ahead and the Land rover climbed it and then dropped into a clearing where the sight made the two humans gasp. They could not believe their eyes, for in front was a battered sleigh, two little people in what appeared to be fancy dress, five reindeer (one with a bandaged nose) and under a tree next to Rubbish, lay Father Christmas (at least, someone dressed like him) with a broken leg.

The Maid stepped out first, and then Finn jumped down and trotted over to Santa. The Butler followed last.

“Oh thank you so very much, Kath, and you Sam. You’re so very kind for helping me,” Santa smiled.

Both Maid (Kath) and Butler (Sam) were surprised to hear the old man use their names – they wondered to themselves, did they know him as he clearly knew them?

“What happened here?” the Butler asked.

The Maid went across to gather the reindeer and check the one with the broken nose. Jeffrey had bandaged it expertly.

“Test flight of the new sleigh,” Santa explained. “Went really well until we hit turbulence. “

Happy called over from where he stood by the sleigh, “Looks like a duck hit us.” There was a small clump of feathers where a very large bird had clipped the sleigh.

The Butler thought that as hoaxes or tricks went, this was a really good one. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble for this one. “Looks very realistic,” he told Santa. “The guys at the pub put you up to it?”

Kath was stroking the reindeer that looked (and smelt) remarkably lifelike and real to her, “Sam...?” she replied.

Santa laughed; Finn shook his head and tutted.

“Dear old Sam, as sensible as ever. Let me prove to you who I am.” Santa closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath.

Finn looked at the Butler.

“Well?” Sam asked.

Santa smiled. “Just wait,” he answered.

“I don’t see anything old chap,” a voice said.

Sam turned to face Finn, “D..did you just say something Finn?”

Finn looked at Sam, “Yes old chap, as usual. I say a lot but you never understand me,” he said.

“You’re speaking English,” Kath added.

“No, we’re speaking animal,” a younger voice piped in. It was Rubbish.

“How can we understand you?” the two humans were amazed.

“I have given you the gift, as a thank you for helping us. And it will also make things a lot easier to organise if we can all understand each other,” the man in the red suit added. “And it may help make you believe that I am who I say I am.”

It was hard for the Maid and the Butler to believe that this really was Father Christmas, that they were helping with the real flying reindeer and that almost as amazing, their Finn and little Rubbish could talk, and the old cat Jeffrey, who seemed to have an opinion about everything.

“I wouldn’t lift him like that old boy,” Jeffrey said as the Butler got under Santa’s right arm and the Maid under his left. They carefully walked Santa to the Land rover.

“We’ll get you back to our house,” Kath told Santa, “I can look at your leg there and get a doctor,” Santa shook his head at his suggestion, “and we can get the reindeer sorted too.”

“They can rest in the barn,” Finn said.

“Okay,” Santa agreed.

“What about the sleigh?” asked Rubbish.

“I’ll bring a tow rope and drag it back to the farm,” the Butler said. “We’ll take a look at it there and try and sort it out.” He was not so sure about that though – he had no experience of magic machines. Diesel engines he could do, flying sleighs would be a bit trickier.

The reindeer climbed up (some rather gingerly) onto the flat back of the Land rover. Happy and Trevor climbed in with the humans and Santa. Jeffrey sat amongst the deer, Rubbish and Finn trotted home. They were back at the garden before the Land rover and the casualties. They were all unloaded and everyone given a bed, mattress or patch of straw for the night.

Santa lay on the settee and waited patiently as Kath took a scissors and cut up the length of his trousers to check on the damage to the broken leg. He grumbled that they were his best work trousers and he'd had them for 200 years or so. Where the Maid had expected to see blood and broken bone there was really bad bruising but any break was already healing. Santa smiled at the look of confusion on her face, "Its magic! I heal quickly. The bone will fix itself in a few days but the bruising and muscle damage will take a bit longer."

Happy was sitting with his arm bandaged and Trevor with binding round his chest.

"You really do need a doctor," Kath chided him.

"And how do I explain all this?" Santa asked, pointing to the two elves and the reindeer with a bloody nose who leaned in from the kitchen.

"It'll be ok." Santa added.

The elf shook his head, "I'm not so sure. 2 days to go and things are not ok. Rudolph can't lead with his nose in plasters, Trevor has broken ribs, I have a dislocated shoulder and Blitzen is not able to pull. You really aren't up to it either."

Santa made to speak but Happy interrupted him, “No Santa, I insist. You are not up to it. You can heal magically but even you will not be ready.”

The Butler, Maid, Finn and Rubbish were sitting around the room, warming themselves by the fire and with mugs/bowls of warm milk. As they sat there looking at the gloomy Santa the realisation hit them. If there was no Santa there would be no Christmas.

Finn looked at Santa, “Do you have a backup plan?”

Happy tutted and Santa shook his head slowly.

The room was silent apart from the crackle of the wood burning in the fire and the loud tick of the wall clock.

There was a loud grumbling sound; everyone turned to look at Finn. “My apologies, its past my supper time,” the deerhound said, sheepishly. That seemed to break the tension that had been building.

“Ok,” Kath the Maid pronounced, “What do we have, and what do we need for a successful sleigh flight for Christmas, and how can we overcome any problems.”

“Five reindeer required, one of them leading and one of the front steering, these are the ones not available.” Happy replied.

“Hmm,” muttered Santa.

“One Santa Claus,” added Trevor, squeakily.

“One Santa Nav,” Blitzen chimed in.

“A sleigh,” added Santa.

“And Santa,” added Finn.

“I might have an idea,” Santa said. They all turned to look at him expectantly.

“Finn, you’re a big strong lad – could you take a reindeers place?”

Finn nodded slowly.

“We need someone to lead,” Happy droned.

Rubbish disappeared out the kitchen, then came back with the flashing collar he had been given for his birthday, “I could do that!”

“Who can navigate?” asked Blitzen.

“Ahum,” an educated voice called from the doorway, “I have just been given a new atlas. How appropriate,” Jeffrey replied. He stood holding a large atlas of the world which he flourished unsteadily.

“The sleigh is flyable, just don’t take any chances,” Happy scowled.

“But we can’t fly,” Finn said. It was a small point but an important one, the deerhound thought.

“Oh,” came the replies from Sam the Butler, Kath the Maid and Rubbish the Rabbit hound.

Jeffrey tutted. “Haven’t any of you realised, Ladies, Gentlemen and Rubbish, that reindeer can’t fly either.”

They had not thought of that either.

“Explain to them, Father Christmas, how it all works” Jeffrey asked.

Santa smiled. “It’s magic, of course. There’s no reason why Finn and Rubbish can’t fly as well.”

Rubbish looked at Finn and they both grinned at each other.

“But what about Santa?” asked Trevor.

“I’ll be..” Santa started but Happy looked over and shook his head.

“I’ll do it,” the Butler called. Kath laughed, “You’ll need some cushions up your jumper!”

“But not many,” Jeffrey giggled. The others joined in and Sam did too.

“This is all going very well but you realise that you’ll never get Sam down the chimney. And you won’t be able to get any elves in time.” Happy was actually not happy about this.

“I know who can do it,” Rubbish jumped up. “I know just the right guys to help!”

“Wow! Yes, we’ll do it! That’s fab!” Scutter beamed.

“Yes please!” shouted Brownie and Scamp. The Rabbits had been amazed when they had heard the story about Santa. Bluebell and Bob were a bit wary, and Bob had even told Bluebell about Rubbish’s tall stories, but it was the cheerful (not!) elf that had convinced them.

“One question,” a little voice piped up. It was Brownie.

Happy scowled, “Yes?”

“Getting down the chimney will be easy. But how do we get back up?”

Happy grinned back, “You’ll find out tomorrow!”

The next day was Christmas Eve, and everyone assembled on the lawn in the morning sunshine within the huge garden. They had all been told to wear what they were going to on Christmas Eve; Jeffrey had called it a “Dress Rehearsal”. The audience to this spectacle was a reindeer with a bandaged nose,

another with a bandaged head, a squeaky gnome with his chest wrapped in more bandages, a really grumpy elf with a permanent scowl and his arm in a sling and a fat man on crutches. None of them looked very happy. In front of them stood a slightly battered sleigh, wood chipped and split. The seat was tied in place (just to hold it more securely, Santa had already declared it safe) and on it sat a man with a cotton-wool beard, in a red suit a few sizes too big, the front evidently stuffed with a pillow (it would have been better with two). Two pairs of reindeer stood in front (one with a black eye, one with an antler held on with tape) and the front pair was a large reindeer and a deerhound, and in the very front a large young brindle-coloured greyhound wearing a red collar. In the sled sat four large rabbits in little harnesses, and beside the imitation Santa, the ancient scruffy old ginger marmalade cat wearing an even older leather flying helmet and goggles. In his paws he clutched a large atlas of the world.

Kath the Maid stood next to Santa and sighed. "Oh dear," she breathed.

"Huh, doesn't fill me with a great deal of confidence either," muttered Happy.

“Nor me,” squeaked Trevor. “I went to Gnomeiversity for 5 years to learn about navigating.”

Santa had that sinking feeling inside, but on the outside he looked really confident. He smiled broadly, “Nowt a bit of good luck and a good dose of magic powder can’t cure!”

He put his hand in his trouser pocket and drew out a small leather bag. From this he took a pinch of golden sand. He shook his head and got out twice as big a handful – it would need a bit more magic than that, he decided.

“OK, just take the sleigh up a few hundred feet, test yourself, then bring her back again, nice and gentle.” He threw the handful of magic dust over the sleigh and accompanying assorted animals (and human). There was a shimmering, a slight flash and pop, and Jeffrey sneezed.

OK, thought Sam, let’s just take it slowly. He gently shook the reins.

Prancer gave Rubbish a nudge, “Righto, Rubbish, lets head on out.”

Rubbish leaned into the harness and started to walk. There was no weight to the sled. So, he started to trot. The sleigh started to slide forward and they headed across the grass towards the garden walls.

“You’d better lift up – over the wall,” Happy called out.

Rubbish was moving faster now and as he came to the wall he leapt upward – and cleared it. Behind him the others could be heard shouting “Blimey” “Watch out” or in Jeffrey’s case, “Crikey! That’s amazing!”

The audience stood with their mouths open watching the sleigh follow Rubbish across the garden and then lurch up into the air. As the greyhound stretched himself upwards and onwards the sleigh, reindeer, deerhound and the rest of the crew followed. Sam had his eyes tight shut and it was only when they levelled off after a few minutes that he dared to look. Beside him he could hear Jeffrey singing loudly and flatly about being in the wide blue yonder. Rubbish was cheering, as was Finn. Forcing his eyes open Sam was absolutely astounded. They must have been a fair way up, as there were clouds around them, and through the gaps he could see the countryside below; a long, long way below. There was nothing holding them up. The greyhound was so fast he had pulled the others with him. They were literally flying. Rubbish was really enjoying this, and as he looked back he was Finn running behind, next

to Prancer. They too were smiling as they breathed in the crisp winter air and ran through the scudding clouds.

“OK Jeffrey,” Sam shouted to the old cat beside him. “Where are we?”

Jeffrey looked down at the Atlas, licked his finger and flicked through the pages. “Somewhere over the South of England” he answered.

“Can we narrow that down a bit?” Sam asked.

Jeffrey shrugged. “We are going so fast I can’t keep track of the roads. I think that’s Salisbury down there,” he pointed to the town far far below.

“It’s Devizes,” called out Donner over her shoulder.

Jeffrey tutted and rechecked the atlas, “By gosh, I think you’re right,” he nodded.

The rabbits all looked at each other, Scutter was particularly concerned. “If it’s like this now, what’s it going to be like in the dark at night?”

The very large reindeer next to Donner called back, “It’s easier in the dark. We navigate by the stars. We’ll get you to the towns; you only need to find your way through the streets.”

Jeffrey, Santa 2 and the rabbits all heaved a collective sigh of relief.

“Time to go home,” Sam (Santa 2) called. Rubbish nodded, slowed a bit and led the sleigh around and retraced his steps through the clouds.

They came down a few thousand feet and this time they did fly over Salisbury. Rubbish drew the sleigh lower and led them down until they could see the figures on the streets below. Sam and Jeffrey were calling on him to behave, but Rubbish knew they needed to practice at roof level. He called this back to Finn, who relayed it to Donner who relayed it to the crew in the sleigh.

“Just be careful,” Sam shouted back.

At that minute, Rubbish had to swerve to avoid the spire of the Cathedral. A group of crows sitting amongst the carved stone gargoyles had a real shock as a group of dogs, deer, rabbits, a cat and Santa flew past.

“Caw, what was that,” one said, pulling himself back up onto the parapet he had slid off. There was a lot of crowing and cawing from the rest of them.

“Looked like Father Christmas, caw, caw,” his mate answered.

“He’s lost weight since last year,” the first one replied.

“And that Rudolph looks strange. He really needs a holiday.”

“Engage cloaking device,” shouted Santa Sam. They had all forgotten that as it was daylight they might have been seen. Brownie looked to her left and there was a blue lever with “cloak” written on it. As she pulled it the sleigh shimmered and vanished. They were invisible to everyone, even the people below who now looked up to see what the invisible commotion was above their heads. Rubbish led them through the snowy streets, above the people shopping below, and the cars and lorries delivering stuff to the shops that the people were then taking home.

“Ready for a test landing, old boy?” Jeffrey called out. They were out of the town by now and there was a large redbrick and stone house ahead in the centre of a field of thick snow.

“Test landing,” they shouted down the line to Finn and Rubbish. The greyhound slowed and swung the sleigh around and downwards. There was a large flat roof at the back and it was here they decided to land. Down they flew, until they were at the same height.

They approached, slowing as they did. “Careful not to overshoot,” called Santa Sam.

Donner and the reindeer shook their heads, “Don’t worry, Prancer called, “We’ve done this a few times before. You lot follow us!”

The sleigh clipped the edge of the roof and within a few yards, drew to a halt.

“Wow! That was amazing,” Scutter laughed. The others looked equally pleased by the test so far.

“Brilliant,” Brownie agreed.

“Absolutely fantastic,” the rounded tones of Jeffrey could be heard though he could not be seen. In the sudden stop he had slid out of his seat and was lying under the rug on which the rabbits had been sitting. He climbed out and straightened his flying helmet.

“Don’t forget your seatbelt.” Prancer bellowed to him.

Finn stood on the roof, his thick grey shaggy coat blowing in the gentle breeze. He felt as young as a puppy again. He had not had such an exciting time for a long time, even considering his adventures with Rubbish and the others.

“Right,” Santa Sam called out, “Time to practice a chimney.”

To their left was a large brick chimney, about four feet high. Sam and the rabbits moved over to it and looked inside.

“Will I get down there?” he asked. Even as a slimmer Santa he had real doubts he would fit.

Prancer came over and looked. “Hmmm, with modern central heating we don’t do many chimneys any more. He relies on a few elves and gnomes. In this case, the rabbits.”

The rabbits all stood to attention and saluted Santa. “Ready for action, sir,” Scutter announced.

From the back of the sleigh a long arm stretched out – it was a crane! It swung over the chimney. The rope lowered to rabbit height and hooked onto the harness. One by one the crane swung them over the chimney and lowered the rabbits down.

Scutter unhitched himself and, after looking carefully out of the hearth, he stepped onto the mat in front of the fireplace. It was a large room, nicely furnished, with a large TV and lots of Christmas cards and a vast settee and chairs. He knew what they were as he’d seen them in Finn’s house. One by one the other rabbits arrived. They had a look around the room, then made their way back to the fireplace. One by one they went back up the chimney.

Just after the last rabbit disappeared the door of the room opened and in came the lady of the house. She had just dusted and put the vacuum cleaner away. She looked at the white rug in front of the fire and gasped – it was covered in black sooty foot prints. She looked again. They looked like rabbit prints?

Back up on the roof everyone climbed into the sleigh, did the pre-flight checks and then took off for the journey home. Within a few minutes they were circling Sam's house and they could see the tiny figures of Santa, the Maid and the reindeer below. Down they swooped, over the garden wall and then slithered to a halt in front of the expectant ground crew.

“Well?” Santa and the Maid both asked together.

“Brilliant!” Rubbish beamed, stepping out of his harness and running to the Maid for a cuddle. Finn was smiling and laughing and went over to Jeffrey who was climbing down from the high seat. He was having problems getting the helmet and goggles off and it took Sam and Finn to help pull them off.

“Absolutely wonderful, old fruit!” the cat called out to the Maid and Santa.

“The book worked perfectly. I am a navigational genius”

Prancer looked at Santa, tutted and rolled his eyes.

“So very modest,” Brownie added.

Finn laughed too, “Yes, never one to blow his own trumpet, are you old boy?”

Jeffrey ignored them and went over to Trevor where they sat on the garden bench and discussed map work, routes and Santa-planning.

“There’s hot drinks in the kitchen and a roaring fire so everyone can have a warm,” Kath called out.

Sam was in there like a shot, glugging a mug of hot mulled wine (alcohol free, of course).

They gathered around the blazing fire in the living room, humans, rabbits and cat on the settee, elf and

gnome on one armchair, deerhound and greyhound on another and the reindeer fitting in as far as they could around the room. If anyone had looked through the window they would have thought it was a convention of hat and coat racks! They began what Santa called a de-brief, to see if there were any problems, whether they had learnt anything new, and whether they needed to make any adjustments.

“Lights,” Rubbish said. They all nodded and Happy wrote it down with his one good hand. “I have my flashing collar but we need tail lights too.”

“We did have two nice big oil lamps on the back but they were broken off in the crash,” Santa replied.

Jeffrey leaned over and whispered something to Scutter and Scamp. They chuckled. “We’ll sort that,” he said. Scutter, Scamp and Brownie jumped off the settee and disappeared out the back door. The meeting continued without them.

“Any navigational issues?” Happy asked.

The reindeer talked about the stars and Jeffrey’s map reading so this was covered.

“Access for delivery?” Santa questioned.

“We got the guys down and up the chimney with the automatic crane,” Finn answered. “Worked fine.”

“I can’t do chimneys,” Santa Sam said, looking down at his cushioned belly.

Santa shook his head and looked over to the reindeer, “Didn’t anyone tell him?”

Donner and Prancer sniggered, Dancer also laughed, and his taped-on antler wobbled.

“You lot are very naughty!” Santa chided them. The rest of the crew looked at Santa quizzically, “What do you mean?” asked Finn.

“We only use chimneys as a last resort; not if there’s another way,” Santa replied.

“Eh?” asked Sam.

“You know, patio doors or fire escape,” came Santa’s answer.

Sam looked at the reindeer who were still muttering and giggling amongst themselves, “You cruel lot!”

Prancer looked suitably embarrassed, “Sorry Santa Sam. We just couldn’t resist playing a joke. But we will need to use the rabbits a lot of the time where you can’t get in.”

Santa nodded, “That’s true, Sam. How did it do with the crane?”

Only the big grey rabbit called Bouncer was left as the others had gone off with Jeffrey. “It was ok. It may take a few of us to carry the presents though.”

Santa agreed, “You can use the hover cart.”

“What’s that?” Santa explained it was a small floating cart for heavy objects.

“That sounds fun,” Rubbish said.

“How will we get to all the homes in the world in time?” Finn asked Santa.

Trevor squeaked, “It’s all to do with the speed of light, a time tunnel and a fair bit of magic!”

With that the door flew open and the old cat and the three rabbits fell in through the door carrying a large bundle. Finn recognised them, as did Sam and Kath; square yellow flashing lights – from the skip on the other side of the farmyard!

“It’s ok,” Jeffrey told them, “No-one uses that lane, and they’ll be back tomorrow.”

“How do we get the presents?” asked Finn.

Santa winked. “That’s the cleverest part of all. In the old days where only the rich had presents and most people had a piece of coal or an orange we could get things in a few sacks. It would be impossible to carry all the presents in the world these days. So, what we do is once we get to the house we have a

materialiser that beams the toys from my workshop in Lapland to the sleigh. Makes things much quicker”.

“And it meets Health and Safety laws too,” scowled Happy.

“Larger presents can be sent straight to the foot of the tree but it’s traditional for us to hand-deliver the smaller ones.”

“Yes, trying to deliver a grand piano used to be really difficult” Trevor nodded.

Aye,” Prancer said, “You think you had a problem getting down a chimney.”

The meeting continued for a while longer until the mince pies were passed around. It was soon time for everyone to get some rest as that night, about 10 o’clock, they would have to get the sleigh loaded up and set off for real.

It was a cold crisp night as the replacement crew settled themselves onto the sleigh. This time the seatbelts were on, and at the back two flashing yellow lights glowed behind the big seat.

Happy and Trevor did the pre-flight checks as the moon cleared the trees above the garden wall, and shone a bright silver blue light into the garden. It was

as if she could not believe what she was seeing and needed to light it up for a better look.

Santa stepped forward and shook Sam's hand. "Well done for volunteering and the very best of luck" he told him. He waved at Jeffrey and the rabbits, and went towards the front of the sleigh. He patted the reindeer and spoke to them in Lapp. "Finn, old chap, you're a brave and loyal hound. Have a safe journey," he ruffled Finn's fur and Finn smiled back, "It's a pleasure, Santa."

When he came to Rubbish, he smiled a special smile, "My young pup, I am so very proud of you for offering to lead the sleigh. The gentlest and cleverest rabbit hound I have ever met." He leaned down and gave the greyhound a squeeze.

Rubbish was so very pleased he could not reply due to the lump in his throat. He beamed up and could only manage, "Thanks Father Christmas."

"Time!" called out Happy.

Santa stood back and gave Sam thumbs up sign. Sam waved at Kath, as the sleigh slid off across the snowy grass. Rubbish started to trot, then to run, and with a skip he took off and the sleigh lifted up into the air and over the garden wall. They were away!

"Where first?" asked Sam.

Jeffrey lifted his goggles and look at the list he had made with Trevor the Santa Nav's help. "Off to the west – over the sea and over America to the Pacific."

The Rabbits jaws dropped, "Where?" They were totally amazed.

Finn shouted from the front, "Makes sense. The sun rises out there so it's Christmas there first! OK Rubbish, let's go!"

Rubbish nodded, clicked the light on the collar with his tongue and off he ran. The one thing in having a greyhound lead your sleigh is that they are fast – even faster than any reindeer or even a deerhound. Away the sleigh sped out over the coast, over the sea towards America.

It all went marvellously; the pacific islands, Hawaii, then to the USA. They started in Alaska (it was very snowy there) and bit by bit crossed Canada and ended up at the very tip of South America. It all went very well, with only a few small glitches.

In New York they flew in through the skyscrapers and landed on a balcony. The window was open, so Santa Sam guided the rabbits into the room to drop off the presents as they materialised on the platform on the sleigh. As usual, they checked through the window that there was no-one there - no-one

awake.at least. A little girl lay asleep, her head of blonde curls sticking out from under her duvet. Scutter and Brownie floated the hover trolley into the room and started to unload the trolley at the foot of the little girl's bed. Suddenly a little voice said, "Thank you very much." Brownie replied, "You're welcome" and then froze.

The little girl sat up, "Oh, you're little rabbits! You're so cute! If you're the Easter Bunny – where's Santa?"

"We're giving him a hand this year. He's very busy," Scutter said. He gave Brownie a nudge and they moved towards the window. Brownie and Scutter smiled and gently stepped sideways, waving as they did so, out of the window. The little girl waved back and slipped off to sleep.

"Blimey, that was close," they said as they jumped back onto the sleigh and the flying machine took off.

"Mary Donahue," Santa ticked the list. "Been nice all year. Why – what happened?"

"She woke up," Scutter said.

"Luckily she went back to sleep," Brownie added.

Jeffrey looked down, "Don't worry – she'll just think it's a dream," he chuckled.

“I know, but she thinks we were the Easter Bunny,” Brownie said.

Prancer turned and called back over his shoulder, “Can’t be – he’s on holiday in the Bahamas until March.”

They all laughed and made their way to the next family.

The rest of the trip was fairly uneventful. The rabbits enjoyed the carrots they found, and, maybe because it was magic, they never felt full so ate as many as they could.

The mince pies and glasses of wine/schnapps/brandy/beer they brought out for Santa Sam who also said the alcohol did not have an effect, again due to the magic. The occasional biscuit or cake (but not fruit cake as that’s bad for dogs) went Finn and Rubbish’s way, and any hay or oats fed the reindeer. Unfortunately no-one left out any cat food or even a dead mouse for poor old Jeffrey.

Once or twice they forgot to wipe up their footprints so a few houses had sooty rabbit prints on the carpet, or little rabbit prints on the fireplace. When one little boy opened his window in Moscow he saw a set of

greyhound prints on his windowsill! That caused some confusion!

Once the eastern pacific was completed, the sleigh sped up and Rubbish led them back over the coast towards home. As they came over the coast they hit a gust of cold air and the sleigh jumped, like it had been hit by an invisible hand. Everything jumped – including Jeffrey. He was tired and his paws were cold so he did not have a proper grip on his book so the atlas bounced and jumped out of his grasp. “Hey!” he exclaimed as the book tripped over the edge of the sleigh and disappeared into the night, down to the ground far below. He was stunned, and upset that his book was gone, but they had no time to go after it. They did manage a stop on the way to deliver some presents to the rabbit warren where Scutter, Brownie, Scamp and Bouncer lived. It included a new cooking apron for Bluebell and a new storybook for Bob (so he had some different tales to tell for a change!).

At the magic garden the sleigh landed quietly. Kath was asleep as the rabbits sneaked in and left a pair of slippers and a little box (with a gold wristwatch inside). The reindeer and Santa were all fast asleep,

as was Happy. Only Trevor was awake and he just waved sleepily.

Everyone untethered themselves from the sleigh and there was a great big group hug. They felt so happy, though tired as it had taken them a long time and yet no time at all to make the journey around the world. It gave some of them a headache just to think about it. That's the thing with magic – it affects everyone in a strange way. The reindeer had been doing it for so long they were immune but the rabbits, dogs, cat and human were dazed by it.

They all drifted off to their beds leaving Rubbish, Finn, Jeffrey and Sam standing together on the lawn under the shining moon. It was so bright it was practically day.

“It's been really good to actually be able to talk to you all,” Sam said looking at the animals around him.

“We've always been talking, even to you, but you've never understood us,” Jeffrey said.

Rubbish thought a bit, “It might be that we all heard each other, but we never really listened.”

Finn's eyebrows rose, “Well said, my young friend.”

Sam shook his head and whistled gently, “Sean, that's really deep,” (the humans called him Sean).

“Rubbish, young fellow you are rather clever,” Jeffrey said.

They all said good night and Jeffrey climbed through the gap in the fence and the others went off to bed.

Christmas morning arrived. Sam was wakened by Kath giving him a kiss and a cup of tea, and thanking him for the lovely gold watch. Sam found a new laptop computer wrapped up on the bedside cabinet - he had wanted a new one for years!

Finn had a lovely new day bed, on little feet so it was just off the ground. “Wonderful! Keep the draught off my old bones!” he chuckled.

Rubbish pulled the gold paper off his present – a new red collar with his name in gold letters on it, and a flashing light on the front. The card with it said “To help you guide the way.”

Next door Jeffrey awoke to find a parcel under the tree for him; it was a small sat nav and a book of maps. The card said “To the best navigator for Christmas.” He was so touched he had a tear in his eye.

Santa and the reindeer were gathered on the lawn and they said their good byes. He was up to flying

home now, and the two bruised reindeer were ok to lead the sleigh home slowly. The ground crew waved as Santa and the sleigh took off. He circled the garden twice, and then off it went up into the air. As he went round for the last time he called down, "If it's ok, I might ask for your help again? Would you be up for it?"

"Yes!" the animals and the humans shouted.

Santa smiled.....and then he was gone.

Kath called from the kitchen door, "Come on everyone – dinner's nearly ready! In you come and wash your hands....and paws!"

"Fabulous!" said Finn.

"I've never had a Christmas dinner before,"
Rubbish said.

"Marvellous! I'm rather peckish," said Jeffery rubbing his tummy. "Brussels sprouts?"

"But of course," said Sam.

"What's sprouts?" asked Rubbish.

Finn sighed, "Let me show you.."

On Christmas Eve, as you get ready for Santa's visit, just remember that it might not be Santa and the reindeer and elves visiting tonight. It could be Santa Sam, Rubbish and Finn and the rabbits. Watch out

for rabbit prints on your fireside rug, or doggie footprints on the windowsill. Remember to leave out a carrot of course (if there are large teeth marks it means reindeer, small teeth marks mean rabbits), but also a dog biscuit for Finn and Rubbish, and maybe a small piece of ham for a rather hungry old marmalade cat!

If you want to read more about Rubbish the Deerhound, and how he became the Largest Rabbit, look out for the book “The Largest Rabbit” available from the Crafty-Dog-Cymru.co.uk website.

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Chaos at Christmas!

This short story is about Rubbish the Rabbit Hound (the little brindle greyhound) and his friends Jeffrey, the ancient marmalade cat, the Mighty Finn, the deerhound, his rabbit friends from the Warren and the humans he lives with, the Maid and the Butler.

On a test flight of the new sleigh Santa crash-lands in the woods and he, along with the elves and some of the reindeer, is injured. He is not going to be up to making the Xmas deliveries. Rubbish and his pals offer to step in.

Can they really do the job? Will anyone fill the Fat Red Man's boots? Will Jeffrey really be able to find the houses? Or find anywhere at all? Who could possibly stand in for Rudolph and guide the sleigh?

Read this latest mini-adventure that will both delight and make you laugh as you follow the adventures of Rubbish the Rabbit hound and see whether he manages to save Christmas.

