

The Night the Llama Saved Christmas
By David J. Wing



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With thanks to
Stephen Thompson- a valued friend and mentor.

Dedicated to Clarissa Troller Habekost,

My Inspiration

And in memory of my parents-

Daphne & Peter,

A real pair of dreamers.

Chapter 1

Sniffles

'Knock Knock'

A small Elf in a small Elf sized green coat, in small Elf sized green trousers and wearing small, Elf sized black boots, stood at Santa's door, looking frantically concerned.

'Sir, we have a problem!'

Storming from his office, Santa, clad head to toe in red, strode down the halls of Christmas HQ, flanked on either side by Elves, two on each side, each more nervous than the last.

As Santa approached the wooden Reindeer pen, the extent of the concern in his face rose.



Santa could hear sneezing over the sound of his boots crunching the fresh snow underfoot.

Popping his head around the entrance, Santa was greeted by a sea of red noses, busily sneezing over

their pen doors.

Elves were running this way and that in an effort to place handkerchiefs in front of each snout before they blew.

'My, oh my, this isn't very good', Santa said, unable to fully comprehend what was happening.

A stout and fair man, Santa walked slowly through the pen, stroking each 'deer in turn and enquiring after their health.

'How are you doing, boy?' Santa asked with concern.

'I've been better, boss, but I'll be good to fly tonight!' Donner replied with little confidence.

'That's my boy'.

Santa continued his jolly, inspiring chats until another Elf came careering down the pen, slipped on straw and slid to a stop at Santa's feet, bundled with tissue paper around his ankles.

'What is it, son?' Santa enquired.

'Santa, Santa, it's *Dasher*!' the Elf stated with real worry.

Santa's eyes widened, ever so slightly. He stood even straighter and marched down to the final door in the pen.

Glancing over the top, Santa could see the alarm. Dasher was flat on his side, exhausted and very, very sleepy.

'What's all this then, Dasher, my sprightly boy not feeling so sprightly?' Santa asked with a smile on his face, hiding his concern.

'I'm al, all, alriiiiiGHT!! Ah Choo!!' Dasher sneezed.

'Uh huh...I can see that. Forgive me for asking, son, but would you mind standing to attention?'

'Sir, I don't think he should move!' a concerned Elf protested.

'It's ok, I'm goo...choo!' sneezed Dasher.

Fumbling, Dasher managed to get to his feet, only for another sneeze to drop him back onto his comfy straw mattress.

'Ahhhh Chooooo!'

'Nice try, son, its bed rest, fluids and lots of strokes for this poorly deer' Santa said, addressing the Elf to his side.

'We'll be ok without you just one year, kid, ok?'

Dasher smiled and then fell fast asleep with a roaring snore.

'Grrrrrummmmm, sssshhhh, grrrrrummmmm, sssshhhh'.

'He'll be fine, just a cold'.

Santa addresses the team.

'Elves, Reindeer, can I have your attention?'

They all turned from their duties and sneezing to look at Santa.

It seems you've all caught a cold'.

The Reindeer and Elves looked at each other disconsolately.

'It's a bit of an odd one, neither the elves nor myself can remember the last time there's been so much as a snuffle in the North Pole, but, heigh ho.

Them's the breaks.

Now, I need 'yays' and 'neighs' as to whether you're fit to fly this evening.

We're already replacing Dasher, he seems to have caught the worst of the cold and I need names.

Who's well enough to fly?'

The Elves looked at the Reindeer and within seconds 'yays' flooded the pen...with coughs and sneezes punctuating.

'Well, that is reassuring, I'm sure we'll be just fine'.

Santa smiled at the 'deer then turned and looked unconvinced at a worried Elf.

'Jim'. Santa said, addressing the Elf to his side.

'Who've we got that you think can replace the fastest 'deer in our team?'

'Gerald, Sir!' he answered without a second thought.

'Gerald?'

Appearing as if from nowhere, a Reindeer suddenly stood bolt upright at Santa's side.

'Gerald, I presume?'

'Yes Sir! Santa, Sir!'

A very eager 'deer, Gerald was brown, head to hoof, looking confident but with his juvenile antlers still baring velvet and his 5'9" of height gave away his early years.

'How long you been in the service, son?' Santa enquired.

'This is my Third year, Sir!' Gerald answered with conviction.

'And how many test flights have you been on?'

'56, sir!'

'Fifty Six?! What are you? Super-Deer?' Santa laughed heartily, with Gerald looking confused.

'Smile son, you're about to get your big break, you're gonna run the team with Blitzen'.

Gerald's smile, which rose skyward when he heard of his new job, swiftly dropped when he heard Blitzen's name.

Blitzen! Lord of the Hoof, hero to Deer and Doe alike.



Santa glanced over Gerald's shoulder and into the near distance.

Gerald could see his eyes move and turned to see Blitzen approaching, coming out of a blizzard that

seemed to encircle him and disappear at the same time.

Before he knew it, Blitzen was before him! Like magic.

'Ah, there you are, Blitzen'. Santa exclaimed.

'Sir! Yes, Sir!' Blitzen's voice bounced off the inside walls of the pens and momentarily woke a very poorly Dasher.

'A little quieter son, Deer and Doe sleeping in here', requested Santa.

'Sir, Yes, Sir', Blitzen's voice became only slightly less noise-some.

'This is, Gerald...you're Vice-Captain tonight'. Santa smiled, he knew exactly what was coming.

'WHAT?!'

The pens visibly wobbled, the Elves cowered, the 'deer's ears dropped and their heads turned away.

Santa smiled joyfully while the alarming sound echoed through the Pole.

'Finished?' he asked, still smiling.

Blitzen looked at Santa with understanding but annoyance.

Turning to the replacement he stared right through Gerald.

'Well, let's get this sleigh ride a movin'!' said a reluctant Blitzen.

He turned with a swivel and disappeared back into the blizzard from whence he came.

Gerald looked at Santa, pleadingly.

Smiling back, Santa said, 'You'll do fine lad, just follow old Grumpy's lead. Ha ha haaaaa'.

Santa's laugh disturbed the Reindeer too. He apologised with a hand up and a smile and then wandered off to get changed for the flight.

“Changed” for Santa, merely involved a bigger coat, as he only had three colours in his wardrobe- red, green and brown- although Mrs Santa had tried to get him to try a nice blue from time to time.

Chapter 2

The Inuit Village

The full Reindeer team stood harnessed to the sleigh, prepared, awaiting Santa and take off.

The toys sat, multi-coloured, piled expertly high but precariously on the back of the sleigh.

So many toys!

'My, oh my, what a lot of presents', said Santa, staring with his mouth open, 'must have been a lot of good children this year!'

Santa beamed a smile at the giant red sack.

The Reindeer looked back from their positions and smiled as best they could between sneezes and wobbled a little from side to side.

Addressing the head Elf, Santa said,

'These 'deer don't look too sprightly tonight lad'.

'No Sir, but they'll get the job done... somehow'.

'Good, good. Well, let's be away then!'

Santa climbed aboard the sleigh, sat down in his brown, mock leather chair and strapped his safety belt across his rather wide belly.

'Maybe time to let the belt out another notch', Santa thought to himself.

The Elves had known that for a while, but it's not nice to tell Santa to go on a diet.

'Everybody, stand back!' shouted the runway Elf.

The spectators all took a few steps backward and even though most of them had seen the team take-off hundreds or thousands of times before, they all stood with jaws gaping and eyes wide.

'OK, boys and girls, let's do this!' Santa shouted with confidence and the joy he always felt before the start of the yearly trip.

Santa cracked the reins, the Reindeer sprinted into action- a few slipping momentarily on the icy runway and the sleigh whipped away.

The Deer reached take-off speed and Santa gave the command,

'Up, Up, **UP!**'

Nothing.

The Reindeer tried, but with their colds they were understrength.

It took a few more strides but with another command, they were up, up and gone.

The Elves on the ground turned and looked at each other, somewhat concerned by the slower than average take off.

Santa looked down over the North Pole and his friends, equally concerned, but jolly, always jolly.

A few 'deer turned to look at Santa, only for him to beam back with trust in his smile and eyes.

Looking at his map- although he really didn't need to, Santa addressed the reindeer.

'OK team, first stop as ever, the Inuit village around the corner'.

'Boss?' Gerald was staring at Santa, 'the village is so near, why don't we just walk the presents around?'

'Come now, Gerald, where's the magic, where's the surprise if Santa and his incredible flying Reindeer walk around, instead of flying?'

'I get ya, Boss, much more magical'.

The team landed only a few minutes after taking off. Despite their rocky start, their landing was somewhat smoother.

The Reindeer's hooves tip toed down, with the sleigh working as a heavy anchor to slow them upon touch down.

They were situated firmly in the middle of the village. With the Reindeer at a stop, Santa stepped out and looked at the team.

All seemed well, other than the sniffles of course.

The people of the village wasted little time and came rushing out, old and young alike.

'Hey, Boss, they're coming towards us?' Gerald stated with surprise.

'It's ok, Gerald, the Inuit people have known about us for thousands of years. They get their gifts first and almost as importantly, you get a carrot straight away. Sound good?' Santa asked, smiling.

'Oh yeah, Boss!' Gerald beamed and the sniffly 'deer all cheered up somewhat.

The children ran up to the poorly 'deer and started petting them.

Santa began handing out the Christmas presents to the youngest children first. He sat on his sleigh and the children, one by one, jumped onto his lap.



The head of the village came to speak with Santa. In the Inuit tongue, he asked, 'How are they doing? I've seen many a poorly 'deer before, but yours never get sick' he asked with concern.

'True, it is a turn up for the books, but rest assured, they're a hardy bunch and tonight will be completed as ever' Santa answered with a confident smile.

'I believe in them, Santa. Might we offer the 'deer a few coats? I realise at the heights you travel it may not help much...'

'They'd be delighted. Many thanks', Santa replied.

The Inuit Chief turned and gave a signal and his children- the ones not playing with their toys, began sizing the Deer individually for a coat.

Each 'deer smiled in gratitude.

'Well team, time waits for no man...except me, Ho Ho Ho!'

The team had heard Santa's joke before, in fact, they'd heard them all before, though it didn't stop them smiling and Gerald, being new to the team, laughed out loud.

'Thanks boy, I knew that was a good one!'

Turning around for take-off, Santa nodded at the Chief, then smiled and waved to the children.

'UP, UP, UP!'

The Reindeer began to trot, to canter and then sprinted into the air.

A little more gracefully this time, they had an audience after all.

Chapter 3

Llama?

A few hours later, Santa and the team were flying high over Central America, having completed deliveries to the good children of Canada, the USA, Mexico, Cuba and a few of the islands.

Turning a little, the team abruptly started to lose height.

The sleigh began to jolt and jerk up and down, like the birthday 'bumps'.

The toys that sat so precariously on the back seemed to be loosening.

Santa felt suddenly very grateful for his seat belt.

'Whoa, team! Whoa! Blitzen, what's happening up there?'

Blitzen was rather busy. A few of the 'deer in the middle were feeling worse and sneezing to the point they kept missing their rhythm.

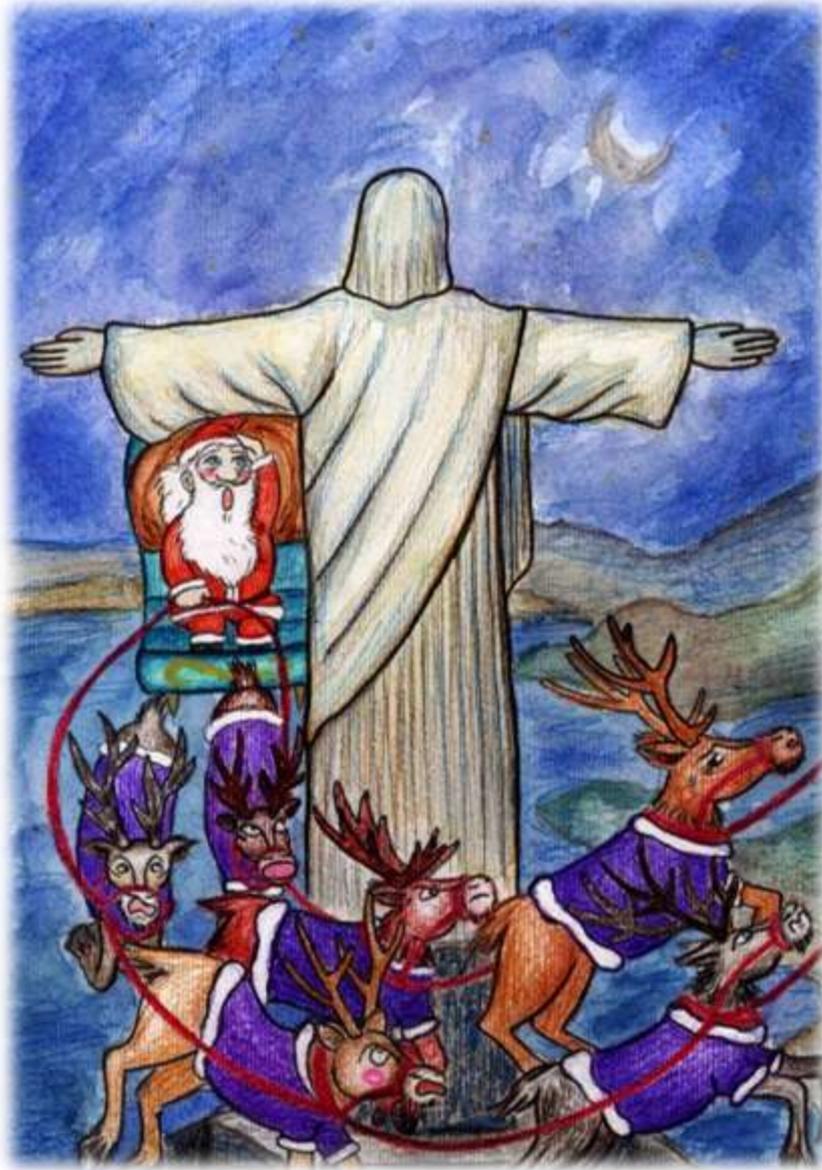
The team slowed and began losing height as a result.

'They're not doing too well Boss. Might need a bit of a rest soon?' Blitzen yelled back over the sound of the wind beating against their faces.

'Understood, boy, Whoa, whoa, whoaaaa!!! Blitzen! UP!!!!'

The sleigh dropped so much they had to make a dramatic turn.

The team stepped up the pace as best they could, dodging and narrowly missing the right arm of Christ the Redeemer- the massive statue that stands overlooking Rio de Janeiro- Brazil.



Looking back after the team had reached safe height again, Santa let out a 'Phew!'

The team joined in.

The next stop happened to be the Amazonian tribe known as the Tikuna people. They lived in the deepest, most out of the way part of the Brazilian rain Forest.

As the team turned and flew through over the misty weather above the high rising trees of the forest, the fur on the backs of the Reindeers began to dampen with the moisture and frizz a little.

Santa began to sweat somewhat and pulled off his big, heavy, red coat to reveal a pair of damp patches under each arm. His red, jolly cheeks now glowed with the heat of a midnight jungle.

All of a sudden and from all around, the sound of the Amazon erupted in a chorus. Birds squarked,

Frogs croaked, Monkeys screamed, everything with a voice to be heard cried and called out a greeting to the Spirit of Christmas and his Reindeer.

As the noise rose to maximum, a flock of Arara birds or Macaw Parrots as you might know them, joined the sleigh on either side, front and back as well. Their colours matched every shade in the rainbow, from a bright, rich blue to the most vivid red and somewhere in between. With their wings spread wide the Arara- so called for the noise they make, needed only to flap once in a while as they caught the air and glided majestically.

The sleigh began to descend, but in the thick forest and at night, even with their vision and that of the Arara, it was becoming difficult to see their approach and where in a jungle they might even land?

Out of the blue, the ground began to glow. First one light, then another, then another and before they could believe their eyes, the reindeers saw twinkling lights shining all throughout the forest. It was a sight to see. Fireflies shone and flew into a pair of straight lines, directing Santa and his 'Deer to the bank of the Amazon river.

The team touched down with a slide and a skid. The mud underneath was somewhat sticky, but sturdy...they hoped.

Santa rummaged around in a drawer under his seat and pulled out a light weight, red shirt. It wouldn't do to deliver presents without at least a splash of colour.

As Santa vanished into the deeply thick trees and plants- getting his shiny, black boots muddy at the same time, the Reindeer took in the sights.

Standing there, they saw a world within a world. It was as if every kind of life in the world lived there. The Arara perched in the high tree tops and gazed inquisitively at their flying friends.

It didn't take Santa long to return, as they were on a tight schedule as with every year and it's a good job he did. For without the Reindeer noticing, they had begun to sink into the mud beneath their hooves.

'Oh dear, oh 'deer', Santa exclaimed, 'what are we to do?'

It was with some luck, or maybe, it was just one of those lucky nights, that a moment later, a member of the Ticuna tribe showed her face from behind a particularly tall tree.

'Eek'.

Santa turned when he heard her startled voice.

She darted back behind the tree swiftly.

'It's ok little girl, really it is, you can come out', Santa called in his most calming voice, which for a Jolly, big man, is somewhat of a challenge.

Her black hair was the first to show, then her dark, black forehead, then her dazzling green eyes and Then, there she was.

'My, my, what a pretty little thing you are', Santa said.

The little girl beamed a Santa sized smile back and then glanced at the reindeer.

Her smile swiftly fell when she saw their predicament.

'Oh, yes', Santa replied, 'I see you've noticed our problem. Do you think there might be anything you could suggest to help us?'

The little girl nodded in a frantic fashion and pulled out what appeared to be a small flute.

She placed the instrument to her mouth and proceeded to blow a tune that almost mimicked the sounds of forest all at the same time. The pitch black night erupted in noise, the Arara took to the sky, the Frogs croaked in unison, the Monkeys screamed with excitement and the river began to stir. The Reindeer were really quite startled. They were now up to their knees in mud and sinking rather quickly.

'Um, I'm sorry little girl, while I think that's a lovely tune, I was hoping you might go and get someone from your village to help pull my 'De...',

Santa didn't finish his sentence.

The little girl's eyes had firmly fixed on the river, moreover, they had fixed on what was emerging in a series of waves.

Santa stood there, open-jawed and marvelling. It's not often that you surprise the eternal Spirit, but this was one of those times.

Fins pierced the water's surface and started to speed towards the Reindeer, who were a mere few feet from the bank of the river.

Some of the 'deer sneezed in alarm.

Some sneezed as they were still ill.

Their eyes grew instantly wider than they had ever been. Even Blitzen almost flinched in surprise.

‘Sharks?!’ Gerald whispered at Blitzen in alarm, still doing his best not to scare the rest of the ‘deer.

Blitzen flicked a glance at Gerald and just smiled.

A second later, the fins fully surfaced, then the shiny, glistening backs and then the long, pointy snouts of the creatures that lived there.

Pink dolphins!

That’s right, **Pink!**

Santa turned to apologise and thank the little girl, but she had vanished back within the jungle without a sound. Santa made a note- one extra big gift next year for her.

At nearly 8 feet long and at night, glowing, the Dolphins circled near the bogged down Reindeer, cocked their heads in surprise at seeing first Reindeer and then stuck Reindeer and then, Santa Claus.

This was becoming a rather interesting night of them.

‘Hello’, Santa called in relief.

The Dolphin nearest him called back, ‘Hello indeed, might you require a bit of help?’ he said with a touch of light-hearted sarcasm in his voice.

Santa smiled back, ‘I think that’s a slight understatement, thank-you’.

Reaching into his sleigh drawer, Santa pulled out a series of different length ropes. He placed the one end in each ‘Deer’s mouth and threw the other ends to the Dolphin pod. Santa jumped aboard the sleigh and with his fingers crossed, a touch of Christmas magic and a pull and thrust of the Dolphin’s tail fins, the Reindeer, the sleigh and Santa began to slowly budge. The Reindeer pulled with all their might, the Dolphin’s splashed and puffed water into the air and Santa jumped up and down to loosen the mud under the sleigh.

In an all mighty jolt, they were free and falling upward, almost tumbling into the sky.

The Reindeer quickly found their footing and raced into a canter, circling to see the Dolphin, already far below, jumping out of the water in circles and splashing back down in delight.

The relief was plain to see on every face in the team.

Santa knew the Reindeer needed a rest. He had hoped that the warm weather of the Amazon would

help his team, sadly, this wasn't the case and sneezes were beginning to ring out much more regularly.

Scouring the map, Santa noticed the high mountain range of the Andes not far from his route through Brazil and took a note to turn west towards Peru after they had completed their remaining deliveries to the children of Brazil.

Looking down, Santa could see what he believed might be the answer to their problem.

On the mountain top to his left, there seemed to be, could it be...Reindeer?!

How curious he thought?

'Look, boys, girls...Reindeer!'

The team all turned to look and instinctively the sleigh set course for the hill-top.

A brief circle around the village and Santa saw it was quiet. The team settled in for the approach, touching down with a little thump.

The 'deer that Santa saw from above were suddenly startled and stood straight, with their heads high...very high?!

The Reindeer turned to one another and then to Santa, looking puzzled.

'Ho Ho Ho, of course, how silly of me. They're not Reindeer, we're far too south for that!'

The Reindeer still looked confused.

'They're Llama!' Santa bellowed.

The Reindeer begin to chuckle among themselves.

The Llama tilted their heads at the sound.

They had been grazing quietly and some had been asleep when Santa arrived.

Santa stepped down from the sleigh and looked around.

From the top of the hill he could see mountains that stretched for hundreds of miles. There was snow on the peaks and grass at the base.

'My, oh my, you know, gang, we never really get a chance to have a good look around do we?'

The 'deer's heads turned and followed where Santa's eyes looked. It was a land that stretched further than they could see.

The Llama that witnessed the touch down were rightly curious. One of them began to approach Santa

with its head high, but cautiously.

'Excuse me, can we be of any assistance?' asked the very tall Llama.

Santa jumped on the spot. He'd been too busy gazing at the mountains to notice the large, grey Llama that now stood beside him.

'Oh, hello there, sorry I jumped. My name is...'

'Oh you needn't explain who you are, Santa. Even Llama at the top of the world know who you are'.

The Llama smiled brightly.

'My name is Alberto'.

'Well, that is jolly to hear. Alberto, it's a pleasure to meet you and yes, you can help. Where is the owner of this farm?'

Alberto pointed with his right hoof to a crumbling stone structure at the base of the hill.

'Right then, to work it is. Blitzen, loosen the 'deer from their straps and let them have a lie down while I speak to the farmer down there'.

'Right oh Boss'.

Blitzen set to work releasing the 'deer and delegated Gerald to do what he could to get water and grass for them.

Alberto walked over to Blitzen, both leaders of their chosen groups.

'Hello there, welcome to my home. I'm Alberto'.

Blitzen looked the large, bold Llama over from head to toe and then spoke.

'Hello, I'm Blitzen, thank-you for your hospitality'.

'Not a problem. If you don't mind me saying, your friends seem a little under the weather. Would you like some assistance in caring for them while you're here?'

'That would be greatly received. They all caught a sniffle before we set out and I fear they won't all have the energy to make the end of the journey', Blitzen answered, looking increasingly concerned.

Alberto turned and called to the rest of the more cautious Llama, beckoning them over.

'These Llama will help. This is Dominga and Beatriz'.

Dominga was a fully grown female, Brown all over and mother of two Cria or baby Llama.

Beatriz stood slightly shorter, as she was still only a teenager with black and white spots.

'Thank you very much ladies'.

The Llama looked at each other and then smiled back at Blitzen.

'You seem to be a hit with the lady Llamas already Blitzen', Alberto said with a wink.

Blitzen looked away from Alberto, a little taken by surprise.

'Oh, oh, uh, no. I...'

Meanwhile, Santa had reached the farm at the base of the hill.

Light escaped from the small square window on the sun facing side of the hill.

He wrapped his fist mightily, but respectfully on the rickety wooden door.

There came a scuffling from inside, a chair sounded like it had dropped and the door opened just a crack.

Peering out, staring from foot to collar, the farmer seemed rather surprised.

He saw black boots-highly polished, white furry cuffs at the base of bright red trousers, white cuffs at the base of a red coat and further up, bright red glowing cheeks on the face of a rather chubby man.

'He, hello?' The farmer said, clearly even more shocked than his Llama.

'Ho ho ho. Hello. I'm...'



'Yh, yh, yes, I, uh, I know who you are, Santa. I'm just having rather a hard time believing it' the farmer stuttered and stammered.

Santa beamed a smile that relieved all tension immediately.

'I can understand that'.

'I'm Julio, I run this farm'.

'It's a beautiful place you have here, reminds me of home...in a sort of all-encompassing way'.

Santa continued to smile and Julio now began to smile back.

'I have a rather large favour to ask of you, Julio'.

'Name it!' Julio was feeling great honour at even speaking to the Christmas Spirit and saw no reason to deny him anything.

'It seems my Reindeer are a little under-the-weather. They all caught a cold back home and we need...well, we need substitutes. Can I borrow a few of your Llama to get me through the night?'

Julio stood flabbergasted. He couldn't quite believe it.

'Of course you can, Santa. They kind of have Christmas off anyway. They're at your command'.

'Thank you so much, Julio. I believe this will work out just fine. The night Julio's Llama saved Christmas', Santa and Julio stood tall, beaming proudly at the prospect.

They strode back up the hill to the sitting Deer and the waiting Llama.

'May I have your attention?' Santa bellowed respectfully.

The Reindeer and Llama all turned to face Santa.

Julio couldn't quite believe what he was seeing?

Santa Claus, his sleigh and his magic, talking Reindeer...but more, his Llama turned at the announcement too?!

'Alberto?' Julio addressed and stared at his oldest llama.

'Hello, Julio, at last we speak', Alberto smiled.

Julio smiled back, his eyes almost popping out of his head.



Santa continued this speech, addressing the Reindeer specifically first.

'You have all done a miraculous job getting us this far. You started the night with sniffles and sneezes aplenty and now you're just plain exhausted.

We had to substitute Dasher straight away and have been very lucky to replace him with Gerald here'.

Gerald blushed slightly.

Blitzen snorted a little, but agreed.

'Those of you unable to continue will stay here. Julio will care for you all and see you well again very shortly. In the meantime, we will need further replacements'.

Santa turned to look directly at the Llama. A few heads turned to stare at Alberto.

'It's ok, friends. Santa needs our help. What do you say?' said Alberto to his friends.

The Llama all turned to face Santa and rejoiced at the opportunity.

'Wonderful! Just wonderful! Now, we have over half the world to go, half a night left and only a few hours to train you Llama. To that, I give you your drill sergeant...Blitzen!'

The Llama turned to the giant reindeer, who, despite his breed, more than matched the tallest Llama-

Alberto.

'Fall in, Llama'.

The Llama stared at Alberto with confused and curious eyes.

Alberto nodded back.

I said, **FALL IN LLAMA!**

The Llama jumped and organised themselves into a very straight line very quickly.

Santa turned to a rather nervous and confused looking Julio.

'He's very dedicated is our Blitzen, over there'.

'Oh yes, I see that' said Julio, still a little alarmed, but reassured.

He was still somewhat amazed at the talking Reindeer and even more so that he had just said 'Hi' to his own Llama, whom he had no idea could or would speak.

'Santa...er, could my Llama always speak?'

'Ho no. It's the Christmas magic. It bewitches them for the night' Santa laughed.

'Will they still speak, after the night is over I mean?'

Santa looked directly at Julio.

'If they want to speak after tonight, they will have the power. Gratitude for a job well done you might say'.

Chapter 4

How to train your Llama



The Llama stood on the hilly mountain top, side by side, to attention.

Blitzen walked slowly past each Llama, inspecting the replacements.

Walking at the same pace, but a few steps behind, Gerald followed, trying to keep the same forceful, commanding expression Blitzen was showing.

All manner of Llama stood to attention- tall, short, brown, black, white, spotted and bald.

Bald Llama must be quite unique, Blitzen thought to himself, not wanting to bring undue attention to the Llamas' hair, or lack of it.

He'd seen shaven sheep, thin haired pigs and even a chicken with a nervous habit of pulling its own

feathers out, but he'd never seen a bald Llama before.

Living at the top of the southern world, it was understandable why this particular Llama wore a coat, a hat with tassels hanging from either side and four multi-coloured warmers around her ankles.

The others didn't seem to care.

He supposed that if the other Llama saw no reason to exclude her, why should he?

'What's your name, Llama?!' Blitzen yelled, addressing the Llama.

'Dominga, Sir!' she answered instantly.

Blitzen nodded and acknowledged her respectful response.

Stopping in front of a Llama with curlers in her hair, Blitzen erupted!

'What's your name, Llama?!'

The Llama was startled, but answered directly.

'I'm Sara, sweetie', she said, as if he should already know who she is.

'Sara, huh?? Ok, Princess', Sara looked at him with scorn, 'best get this straight right now...

I AIN'T SWEETIE! Blitzen roared at her.

'I ain't HONEY!

I ain't **SWEETIE!**

and I sure as sugar ain't **DARLIN'!**

I'm BLITZEN!

Hear my name and obey my law!

Sara's curlers flew from her head in fright, and her curls dropped to a droop.

Now with her head down and her hair floppy, the Llama looked down, saddened and timid.

'I am here to turn you into the very first, Southern American representatives of the awe inspiring North Pole Reindeer Sleigh Team!

We are responsible for all the joy that spreads throughout the world just once a year.

We carry the toys that Elves worked all year to create, to all the good children of the planet.

You are here to try to earn a place on that team!

This is an honour!

A privilege that few Reindeer achieve',

Blitzen glanced at Gerald, so he knew how lucky he was too.

'and one that no Llama has ever achieved! You want to join this team?'

The Llama jumped at the question, stars in their eyes with the challenge and responsibility this was.

'Sir, yes Sir'. They all chanted in unison.

'I can't hear you?!'

'**Sir! YES, SIR!**' They screamed back at him.

'That's more like it. Now, FALL OUT, RECRUITS!'

Here begins the toughest training you have ever embarked upon...enjoy'.

Blitzen yelled sarcastically and smiled a smile that filled the Llama with nervousness.

Have you ever seen a Llama do a push up?

No? Not surprising, it resembles putting up and taking down an ironing board, though less dainty.

Blitzen stood over the recruits, roaring to a rhythm which the Llama failed to keep.

They seemed to him, very lazy, Llama. It wasn't their fault however, their lives revolved around eating, sleeping and on occasion spitting.

Push ups are not natural part of a Llama's daily routine.

'Up! Down! Up! Down! One, two, one, two!'

Glancing from left to right it was clear who was having the most trouble with Blitzen's regime.

Hector had no trouble with the 'down' part, it was the 'up' that seemed to cause some difficulty.

Standing over the rather weighty Llama, Blitzen just stared.

Not a mean Reindeer, per-se, Blitzen was however, having a troubling time seeing how a physically challenged Llama could run, let alone take flight, even with the magic of Christmas on his side.

Blitzen's worries seemed to make little difference to Hector though.

While the 'push-ups' might not have been his cup-of-tea, he was somehow still confident that he would pass selection.

'Ok, Ok, Stop!' Blitzen saw the relief in their eyes.

'Time for a light jog', Blitzen smiled mischievously.

The Llamas again looked sceptical and concerned.

'The bottom of the mountain! The Llamas groaned.

'And back up'. They groaned again.

'TWICE!' The groans were cut short when the marching started.

'Your left, your left' Blitzen screamed, 'your other left, Hector!'

Hector stumbled and banged into Sara in front, who cast him a frustrated look backwards.

♪♪♪

*Your left,
your left,
your left,
right,
left.*

*My back aches,
my shoulders' tight,
my belly shakes from left to right.*

Blitzen looked at Hector as that line was shouted.

♪♪♪

*I don't know, but I've been told,
Santa's sleigh is mighty cold.*

*I don't know, if I am bold,
Blitzen roars and I am sold.*

*Sound off,
sound off,*

Sound off, 1, 2, 1,2, 1,2,..3 4!

Still feeling fresh as a daisy, Blitzen observed his Llama recruits falling all over each other and generally having a hard time standing at the end of their run.

Gerald counted the Llama off in order as they finished their second climb of the Andes Mountain range.

Alberto first, Julio Jnr second- named after the farmer, Arturo third, then Dominga.

Trailing at the back, not surprisingly, was Hector.

The Llama watched as he dragged himself up the peak for the second and final time...but he wasn't alone. Sara was with him, keeping pace, encouraging him.



As the Llama realised the support she was giving him, one by one they stood and staggered to the edge of the mountain and began shouting towards the pair.

'Yes! Come on!'

'You can do it!'

'Come on, Hector!'

The Llama started to leap up and down, forgetting their exhaustion.

'Come on, Hector, I'm here, we're all here. You can do it!' Sara screamed with encouragement and smiled widely.

'Almost there'. She said.

Hector raised his exhausted neck and looked up. He was so close. He could see all the other Llama jumping up and down, cheering him on.

Hector couldn't help but smile. Not far now, he thought.

Twenty metres. Eighteen. Fifteen- nearly there. Ten metres.

'Come on, Hector! You're doing it!' Sara screamed in his ears.

Eight metres. Five. Three...one, **THERE!**

He did it! He couldn't believe he'd made it.

Lots of hugs and pats on the back followed.

Sara stood and smiled as Hector was lifted up and carried away to the trough for a celebratory and much needed dip of water.

He dunked his head in so far, his neck was wet to his shoulders.

Blitzen looked over at Sara and stared.

She had gone beyond what he thought she'd ever do. She'd been supportive, encouraging...a friend to Hector, her competition.

She wasn't that arrogant, curly haired prima-donna anymore; she was a valued member of the team, a leader for the future maybe.

Blitzen walked over to Sara and nodded at her his praise.

'Well done, Llama. You did well'.

Sara stared back at the Reindeer.

'I know', she said, not needing Blitzen's approval or praise and walked over to the trough to join the celebrations.

'Ok, so maybe she's still a little arrogant', Blitzen thought, 'I can work with that'.

'RIGHT!' Blitzen shouted, 'time for a bit of aerial practice', Blitzen smiled.

Chapter 5

Flight

There were many parts of the training which could be excused- flying was not one of them.

Gerald lined the Llama up in pairs. Each pair was placed together to practise and see who suited who.

Beginning at the back- in front of the sleigh, the Llama took their positions.

Alberto and Julio Jnr first, Catuna and Dominga second, Hector and Gerald at the front, with Sara and Rudolfo and Maria and Arturo taking up the other places.

There would be numerous flights and different combinations, but these were the first Llama to attempt flight, with Gerald taking charge to lead the way.

Blitzen and Santa would watch from the ground.

Standing as tall as he could, Gerald took the lead right position and awaited the command to take off.

The plan was to take flight, ascend to ten thousand feet, circle and land on top of the Julio's house- landings on buildings being a key part of the job.

'Llama!' Blitzen roared for attention, 'You are to follow Gerald's lead. Obey him like you would the word of Santa Claus!'

The Llama nodded swiftly and with respect.

Blitzen gave Gerald the 'ok' nod.

Gerald turned to the Llama and gave his first command.

'Llama! Begin trot!' he said forcefully.

The Llamas' legs accelerated from standing to a trot, then to a canter...then they were running!

Running so fast! So fast in fact, they forgot to leap at the end of the mountain top.

Santa, Blitzen and the worried Julio watched dumfounded as the Reineer, the Llama and the Sleigh slid and disappeared down the far side of the Andes Mountains.

They vanished in a silent second, only for a crash and crumbling noise to follow directly after.

Santa, Blitzen and Julio ran to the edge. A voice rose from halfway down the hill..'We're ok...' It was Gerald.

Relief spread over Santa and Julio's faces.

Blitzen's face showed no relief, simply stern resignation and understanding as to the ability of his new team.

The Llama were tangled in the reigns, the sleigh was upside down and the team looked somewhat like they'd been hog-tied on a Texas ranch.

No one was hurt, just a little dented pride. Santa and the farmer began to chuckle.

Blitzen was not laughing. Blitzen was now fully scowling.

You have never seen a Reindeer as frustrated and thoroughly unimpressed as Blitzen was at that very moment.

'AGAIN!' Blitzen roared.

Santa and the farmer almost jumped out of their skin.

They watched as Blitzen continued to instruct and demand better from the team. They continued to practise.

A second try, a third, a fourth, a tenth...Blitzen was becoming even more irritable than he had been.

Santa began to grow concerned. The night was inching along and the team seemed unable to find their feet, so to speak.

The eleventh try was fast approaching.

The Llama were getting frustrated too, but their frustration stemmed from landing in crumpled piles on a repeated basis and Gerald was saddened that his leadership was not working.

Hector had an idea. He whispered in Gerald's ear. Gerald's eyes brightened and he took off towards the barn. Scouring the straw laden structure, Gerald kicked hay here and there, looking for something. He returned a few moments later, dragging two medium sized planks of wood between his teeth and dropped them at the end of their runway.

Blitzen watched his young replacement and seemed to nod his approval.

The team lined up once more, a little sweatier than they had been at the start. Sara's hair had gone from curly, to droopy, to frizzy and finally to sticky...she wasn't happy.

'Again!' Blitzen roared.

Gerald turned to his team. 'I know you're all tired. So am I'. Turning to Hector, smiling and then to the rest of the Llama, 'but I think this is the one! Tonight, we fly!'

The Llama all nodded and stared out at the runway, their eyes gleaming like steel.

'Begin trot!' Gerald commanded.

Trot, canter, run...the wooden planks were fast approaching. Gerald and Hector saw them first.

They looked at each other, their eyes in agreement.

Their hoofs thundered onto the wood... they leapt!

Their next step was in the air.

Feeling the pull of the reigns lighten, Gerald knew and watching from the mountain below, so did Santa, Blitzen and the farmer Julio...the team was UP!

They rose and rose up into the sky, hundreds, then thousands of feet high.

Only when they reached the first clouds did Gerald allow himself to look down.

His smile was tempered by the wind speed which pulled his cheeks apart and resulted in an unrecognizable flapping noise rather than speech.

Talking would have to wait. He looked to his left and saw the grin on Hector's face, then back at his team.

They were all beaming a Santa sized smile.

The team circled the mountain a couple of times to get used to the feeling of air under their hoofs, then Gerald dropped his right shoulder, the team banked and descended to the right.

Fast approaching the farm house, Blitzen and Julio were nervous.

Having barely been airborne before, landing was not something the team were specifically well trained in.

Santa merely smiled a confident smile.

The team levelled with the roof, Gerald and Hector slowed to a canter, the rest of the team followed and before they knew it, they had come to a shaky but solid rest on the stone roof.

Blitzen walked slowly up to the team, who were panting hard and showing real signs of relief.

Gerald's gaze rested on Blitzen as he approached.

Gerald felt sure he saw something?

It looked, almost like pride in Blitzen's eyes.

Chapter 6

Selection

'Llama! Attennnnhut!' Blitzen commanded in his most authoritarian voice, which was in fact, much like his voice the rest of the time.

The Llama stood instantly as tall as they were able and stared straight ahead.

'You are all aware there are nine positions available on this team'. The Llama stood firm.

'Each and every one of you has performed admirably and in some cases, far beyond that'.

Blitzen was careful not to look at anyone in particular.

'On your test flights however, you did: narrowly avoid crashing into Machu Piccu, clip the snowy peaks of

numerous trees and allowed the 'dummy' Santa to fall from the Sleigh...three times!' a few of the Llama giggled, 'That is not on!'

The giggling stopped quickly and their heads all dropped to the floor.

'All that being said...we need you and you're all we have'.

The Llama glanced up and around, not insulted by Blitzen's comments, but thrilled by what it meant.

'I'm going to read these names out. When you're called, walk forward and stand to the right of Gerald'.

'Alberto!' Blitzen roared.

Alberto jumped to an even straighter attention, smiled widely and walked swiftly to join Gerald.

A round of applause followed, the Llama stomping their hoofs on the stony mountain beneath them.

'Dominga!' She smiled and joined Gerald and Alberto.

'Julio Jnr!' Julio Snr-the farmer, smiled.

Hector looked concerned. Sara caught his eye and smiled her support.

'Sara!'

She joined the other selected Llama and beamed.

'Catuna!'

'Maria!' The balding, female Llama stepped forward.

'Arturo!'

'Rudolfo!' Rudolfo trotted forward and stood proud.

The second to last choice, he was visibly relieved, but tried to hide it.

'And, lastly...'

The Llama muttered and hushed as soon as Blitzen looked at them.

'This has been a very difficult decision...'

The three remaining Llama stand still, to attention.

'You remaining Llama are all very capable, but I have space left only for one'.

Beatriz and Jorge glanced at each other nervously. Hector caught a look of support from Sara.

'The final member of the team is...'

Beatriz began to move forward.

'Blitzen, sir?'

Blitzen looked at the Llama with surprise.

'What is it, Llama?!'

'We...That is, Jorge and I are in agreement'.

'Yes?' said Blitzen, getting a little disgruntled at being interrupted.

'Well, we feel Hector is the right Llama for the final spot and we'd like to take this chance to remove ourselves from selection'.

The two Llama smiled at each other.

Hector's eyes bulged almost out of his head, he couldn't believe it! Sara smiled in his direction even wider than before.

'Is this your final decision?!' Blitzen asked the pair.

Beatriz and Jorge looked at each other and nodded slowly, smiling.

'It is, sir!' Said Jorge.

'Well then, Hector!' Blitzen roared.

Hector stopped looking at his future team mates and stared directly ahead, hoofs clicking as he resumed his stance to attention.

'Hector, you are hereby selected as the ninth and final replacement for Santa's team!

Congratulations...team mate'.

The Llama all cheered!

Hector hugged the other two Llama first and thanked them with all his heart.

'Thank you so much, both of you!' He beamed at them.

'It's not us, Hector' Beatriz replied, 'you did this all on your own. You deserve this'.

The rest of the team embraced Hector, his legs trembling in joy.

'Well done, Hector!' Maria said.

'We knew you could do it', Julio Jnr added.

'Hector?!'

Hector turned to listen to Blitzen.

'You showed real determination out there on the course and I was impressed with your aerial work too- Gerald told me the planks of wood were your idea. You deserve this. Well done'.

Hector nodded and smiled.

'Well done to you all!' Blitzen roared. The Llama cheered back at Blitzen, the sound almost knocking him over.

Almost as soon as the words had left Blitzen's lips, the Llama began facing off against one another.

Julio Jnr chewed up his face in an exaggerated manner, pulled his head and neck back and let fly in Hectors' direction. The impact on his face took him completely by surprise.

He shook his head, Julio's spit dripping down his cheek to his chin and falling to the ground, slowly.

Llama spit is quite sticky and takes a few moments to drop.

Blitzen started to walk over to the Llama, meaning to stop the strange display. Sara stepped in front of him.

'What are you doing? What are they doing?!' Blitzen demands.

'It's a Llama thing, best not to get in the way'. Sara tried to explain.

'That's just ridiculous! I'll not have this silliness!' Blitzen carried on, approaching the contest.

Too late!

In a misjudged shot, Hector's spit missed its intended target- Julio Jnr and landed squarely on Blitzen's snout!

Blitzen's eyes moved slowly and stared directly down at the tip of his nose.



The Llama stood in shock and turned instantly silent, their mouths wide open.

Sara stared with disbelief as Hector wiped the remaining spit from his mouth.

The spit dripped slowly, almost endlessly to the ground in a string. Hector couldn't stop from staring at Blitzen, shocked at what has just happened.

Suddenly a noise began to break the silence, low and deep at first, then a little louder. A huge roar!

Blitzen...

He, was, laughing?!

The Llama, Gerald, Hector and even Santa- who'd been observing the selection process- couldn't believe it.

Hector's belly started to wobble, the beginning of a laugh, then Santa and then everyone else erupted into hysterics.

A few of the Llama even fell to the ground, out of breath from laughing so very hard.

Sara just smiled and looked at Blitzen with a little sparkle in her eye.

Chapter 7

Now or Never

Checking on his poorly Reindeer, Santa stroked their noses and even wiped the snot off a few with his sleeve.

'That'll get a bit crusty in-flight', Santa thought to himself.

'Still not feeling great, huh guys?'

The Reindeer lifted their heads slowly, Santa smiling back with his loving eyes.

'It's ok, our friend Julio here is going to continue taking good care of you and when you're better, we'll arrange for your flights back home to the North Pole'.

The Reindeer smiled a little, but were rather sleepy and fell back to their comfy straw beds in a heap.

'No hurry though, the Llama are doing well and there's always next year' Santa beamed at his life-long friends.

The Reindeer mumbled their disappointment at missing the deliveries but were simply too tired to do anything about it.

They made it a quarter of the way at least. It'll just have to be up to the new recruits to step-up and make this year great!

Standing away from the sleigh and watching the Llama taking their positions, Blitzen looked nervous.

'What's up...Sweetie? Sara asked, startling Blitzen.

He huffed a little then looked at her as she stood next to him.

'They'll do fine. We all will. You've really put us through our paces', Sara reassured him.

Blitzen huffed again.

'What more could you have done? We're flying at least. Sure we're a little ragged around the edges, but at least we can get off this mountain', Sara smiled.

'I know...how about some good luck?' Sara suggested.

Blitzen barely had a moment to register her suggestion, before Sara planted her lips firmly on his.

Blitzen's eyes widened from their usual tight squint and then relaxed and closed with surprising satisfaction.

Sara opened hers a moment later to see Blitzen very much enjoying the moment. She then pulled away swiftly.

'Well!' Sara stated.

Blitzen woke from his daze abruptly.

'Let's be off then!' Sara said, waking swiftly away to take her place on the sleigh next to Hector, only stopping briefly to cast a look back at Blitzen.

His face was now glowing a bright, beetroot red colour and he couldn't shake the look of surprise from his face.

'Hello boy', said Santa, approaching from nowhere, 'You're looking pleased with yourself', he smiled mischievously.

'Uh, um, um', Blitzen fumbled his reply to the Boss.

'I see...' Santa looked over and saw Sara smiling subtly, 'Shall we see what Your Llama can do?'

'Um, yes, yes Sir!' Blitzen stormed off to the front of the sleigh, joining Gerald.

Gerald smiled at Blitzen.

Blitzen shot a scowl back at Gerald, who quickly removed his grin and whipped his head around to stare straight ahead.

Santa stood at the head of the sleigh and addressed them together as a team, with the other Llama watching, as was the farmer, Julio.

'Reindeer, Llama, friends old and new', Santa looked at each of them individually with great respect and gratitude.

'Each of you Reindeer has gone above and beyond to help us with our deliveries this year.

We were stricken by the common cold and have needed to appeal to you Llama for your help and you have tried your hardest to save us from a disastrous Christmas.

Let us all give thanks to one another'.

Each one of the team looked to their partners and then in turn to the other members of the team.

'Are we all ready to make Christmas History?!' Santa asked with force and joy.

'Yes, Sir, Santa!' The team cheered in unison.

'Then, let's take to the sky!'

Santa took his seat, strapped himself in, grabbed the reins evenly in both palms and bellowed at the top of his lungs...

'Up, Up, **UP!**'

Blitzen and Gerald begin their trot. The Llama and few remaining Reindeer followed.

Trot, Canter, Run!

The edge of the mountain was approaching fast. The planks of wood had been removed. It was now or never!

Ten feet from the edge, eight feet, five, three...UP!

They were UP!

Hoofs trod firmly on the thin air of the Andes Mountains as if on blocks of granite.

The sleigh dipped a little as the ground vanished beneath the Llama, and then levelled out.

The team were now flying in unison with a new found and deserved confidence.

They circled the village.

The remaining Llama and Julio below, waved up at their friends.

Even a few of the sickly Reindeer managed to stick their heads out of the barn and smile at their saviours.

'Mummy', a little Llama called, looking up.

'Yes, my dear?' answered his mother.

'When I'm bigger, can I help Santa?'

His mother smiled as widely as Santa and answered,

'I'm sure you can darling, best get training though, only 364 days until next Christmas'.

He and his mum glanced back up at the sky and before they knew it, the team were but a speck in the clear, Peruvian night sky.

Next stop, Chile!

Chapter 8

South Africa

Thundering through the clouds, Blitzen and Gerald met the drizzle head on and without flinching. Their dry, thin fur allowed the rain to pass almost straight through them, but the Llama were not so lucky.

Llama fur is generally thick and soft and when a Llama runs through the sky at the speed of Christmas, his or her fur becomes damp and knotted, to say the least.

The bald Llama had no such problems with the weather, wearing her poncho and feeling rather cosy against the wind and rain. Santa had his big red coat, so was, as ever, jolly.

'I think it's time to break out those coats the Inuit's gave us, don't you, boy?' Santa shouted to Blitzen. Blitzen turned his head and saw what can only be described as fur balls with legs running behind him. It's hard not to laugh at a sight like that and even Blitzen managed a sly smile.

A smile that was cut short by a stern look from Sara, who herself, was looking far from glamorous.

Approaching a rather robust looking cloud formation, Santa signalled to the team to set-down in the middle of a cumulus.

Landing on clouds is a tried and tested exercise for Reindeer, well, for Santa's anyway.

Not so much for Llama.

Having let Gerald direct the team through Chile, Blitzen took over for this manoeuvre.

He turned his head and motioned for the team to bare left, reduce speed to 50% and to gradually slow to a canter.

The team saw the flat, thick looking, fluffy mass getting larger and began to slow.

They angled their descent and landed with a thud.

Clouds burst free beneath and floated up all around them.

After a few minutes the misty white sky cleared and the team saw they were standing comfortably at the edge of the cloud formation, with little more than a few feet to spare.

Gerald began dispensing the clothing to the frizzy looking Llama.

The Reindeer, experienced at high altitude flight didn't need the added warmth.

The shivering Llama soon began to warm up and a smile crept back onto their puffy faces.

'Ready, Team?!' Santa asked with a renewed vigour.

The team responded positively, turned for the run up and before they knew it, were airborne again and approaching the coast.



With one more step the new members of the team saw, for the first time the Southern Atlantic Ocean.

Their jaws dropped, which isn't the best idea when you're thousands of miles high.

Their teeth chattered and their mouths filled with air, ballooning.

They blew out in unison, still amazed at the vast blue sea that spread out in front of them.

That far out to sea the waves reach huge heights as there aren't any rocks to crash into.

A few hundred miles across the ocean and the bumps began- turbulence.

Anything that flies, experiences bumps when the air warms and cools quickly.

For our new team, this was a first.

A couple of the Llama lost their footing and tripped, their hoofs falling below them, with only the speed of the others keeping them in the air.

They dangled here and there while they tried and eventually regained their pace.

Santa, experienced in the ways of nature, had strapped into his seat, but even he bounced up and down quite a few times.

To watch Santa jumping around in the sleigh was quite comical to the Llama, his belly seemed to wobble all over the place and did a lot to relieve the tension they were all feeling on their first flight.

‘Look, over there team’ Santa shouted over the rushing wind in his face.

The team’s heads turned at once and far, far off, just approaching them, was Africa.

The Llama double blinked at the sight and even Gerald would admit, this was something he’d not been prepared for. The team had travelled down from the North Pole, through Canada, the USA, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Peru, Chile and a number of other countries. They’d tackled bumpy skies, heavy winds and rain, but they had not, at that point, passed over an entire ocean and as they ran towards it, Africa began getting bigger and bigger.

‘Ok, team, time to set down. We’re aiming for the *Cape of Good Hope*. It’s that pointy bit at the bottom, by the sea’.

The team looked down. At the height they were flying, everything looked like the they were staring at a map.

‘Blitzen!’ Santa yelled over the wind, ‘take us down’.

Blitzen nodded and began his circling turn and descent.

The lower the team got to the sea, the higher the waves became. They crashed against the rocky walls of the beach and then appeared to leap upon the sand.

Well trained in the art of low level flight, Blitzen was careful not to get Santa, the toys or any of the rest of the team in the slightest bit wet.

Up and over they rose over the cliffs they flew. Not far below, the cheeky, Chacma Baboons that lived in the trees and by the shore, jumped up and down, screeching at the top of their lungs and marvelling at the flying animals and the many multi-coloured presents, that sat high on the back of the sleigh.

Santa smiled at the monkeys, dropping a toy or two. Monkey’s like presents too, after all.

Looking down, Santa saw he had covered the vast majority of Africa, little remained but the nation of the Zulu people, KwaZulu-Natal (Natal in Portuguese means Christmas or Birth).

Unlike the Inuit villages, KwaZulu-Natal is home to more than 10,000,000 people.

This was always a big job.

Trundling to a stop on the hilly countryside in the *Valley of a Thousands Hills*, Santa set about his task. The Reindeer had a rest and the Llama looked around at the rolling hills, the birds flying in the sky and the odd things that seemed to be approaching.

Gerald and Hector stood dumb-founded. They were horses, they thought, but they were smaller, mini-versions...and they were black and white?

'They must be wearing coats' Gerald announced.

The other Reindeer and Llama turned to see what they were looking at.

A herd of Zebra were running over the hill and they, well, they didn't seem to be stopping!

The team began to shift and shuffle where they were standing, then came a noise.

It felt like thunder, but it was coming from the low down on the ground and it wasn't very far away.

As the Zebra approached, at some speed, Blitzen ran after them and managed to catch up to the lead horse.

'Hey, hey, what's going on?!' Blitzen enquired with a level head but in earnest.

The Zebra slowed a little, but only a little.

'Can't you hear?' The Zebra asked in surprise.

'Yes, I can. What is it?!'

'It's a LION! You lot better run!'

And with that, the herd vanished over the next hill top.

Blitzen turned and ran back to the team.

'Ok, Team. Break's over, saddle up, we've gotta get airborne and fast!'

The team looked unsure.

'NOW!' Blitzen barked.

Before they knew it they twenty meters off the ground. Just in time as a family of Lions came charging after them. The Llama stared in disbelief. The Reindeer weren't exactly used to the sight

either.

‘Blitzen, Blitzen!’ Sara screamed from his side.

‘WHAT?! Blitzen snapped.

‘Where’s Santa?’

Blitzen’s face dropped and in a split second he tilted the team to the right, in pursuit of Santa Claus.

By now the Lions had stopped their chase, all except for a Lion cub that kept growling at the top of it’s voice.

It sounded like this, ‘Mewwww’.

It wasn’t long before the team found Santa. He and his big bag of presents were fine.

They were however high up in a tree, with a few rather hungry Lions pacing below.

‘What do we do, Blitzen? How do we get to Santa?!’ Gerald asked.

‘It’s OK, team. Slow to a canter. We’re gonna have to swing by.

You’ll like this, Santa’s gonna jump’.

The team looked confused, but couldn’t help but imagine what a leaping Santa, presents and all would look like.

The team descended to ten meters, slowed and levelled out.

Santa could see his sleigh from quite a distance and knew what was required of him.

He grabbed the sack in one hand and steadied himself with the other.

His feet were in the right stance and he counted off the seconds as the roaring sleigh neared and the roaring Lions called, ‘Grrrrrrrowl’.

5,4,3,2...1!

Blitzen and the team screeched by and turned to Santa just as he jumped, flying through the air in the most unfashionable way possible.

His jolly belly wobbled left and right as his bearded face made the most ridiculous expressions.

Thud!

He was in.

Blitzen turned the sleigh and the Lions, rather disappointedly, settled down for an evening nap.

‘Thanks team. You were superb just then’ Santa panted.

The team breathed out in one big sigh of relief.

Chapter 9

Oasis

As Santa and the team flew faster and faster through the sky, it became increasingly clear that another stop was needed. The team were doing well, but no amount of training prepares a Llama for high altitude flight, sprinting for hours on end, the constant barrage of weather that whips into your face and a group of wild Lions attempting to eat you.

The team simply needed a break.

Santa's Reindeer and Llama had managed to cover more than half the world already and at this stage in the evening, they had found themselves somewhere over the Sahara Desert. Not usually the place to find a nice, cold drink.

Keeping their eyes out, Santa spied someone that might have an idea where they might stop.

'Blitzen' Santa called out.

He twitched his right ear to hear Santa's order.

'Down on the right, see that bumpy thing down there?'

Blitzen glanced down and nodded.

'That's where we're going, if you please'.

Blitzen nodded again, looked across at his new flight partner- Sara and the pair led the team in a downward spiral until they were a matter of a few hundred meters off the sand.

Lowering and lowering, the bumpy thing they had spied from high above became clearer and clearer.

The sleigh slid to a stop in a cloud of brilliant, yellow sand.

When they stopped coughing, they saw that the bumpy thing... well, it was something more.

'Hello, Sir' called out Santa.

'Hello?' answered the bumpy thing.

'Might I bother you for a little help?' Santa enquired.

'Of course you can. Judging by your friends here, I'm guessing you're Santa' Santa nodded, 'they're Reindeer', Santa nodded again, 'and they are...well, I'm a little flummoxed...what are they?'

Santa smiled and turned to introduce the team.

'Reindeer and Llama, this is...I'm so sorry, I missed your name?' Santa apologised.

‘Quite alright, I forgot to offer it, I’m A’zam’ the bumpy thing said.

‘Team, this is A’zam, he’s a dromedary Camel. That means he has a single bump or hump on his back’.

The team nodded in an exhausted manner.

‘Hmmm, seems they’re a touch thirsty’ A’zam said.

‘We all are. Do you know where we might find some water?’ Santa asked.

‘Sure’, said A’zam, turning to his right, ‘a little over than sand dune there’s an oasis.’

‘What’s an oasis, Boss?’ called out Gerald from the sleigh.

‘It’s just what you’re needing’, A’zam replied.

Santa thanked the Camel and the team took flight. A few moments later they saw exactly what they were after.

An oasis is an area in a desert that has water and plant life or trees growing nearby.

A look of instant relief flew across the faces of each of the team, including Santa.

In the shade of a group of very tall palm trees and with heads dipping repeatedly, satisfaction replaced exhaustion and the team sighed a great sigh.

Sadly, they couldn’t stay long. Their night was only getting shorter and still a good part of the worlds children were without presents. Work had to resume.

Pulling the sleigh to a flat valley between dunes, the team took their steps from trot to canter to sprint and up, up, UP they went.

Chapter 10

Return to the Pole

Travelling against the sunrise was not Santa's usual route, but he'd simply fancied a change.

This put more stress on the team, but for the Llama, it was all an adventure.

Dawn was fast approaching and a few early risers looked skyward to see a shape speeding past the Eiffel Tower.

Santa and his 'deer had been seen once or twice over the years, it's almost impossible not to be, but who'd really believe they saw Santa? Really?

The iconic white cliffs of Dover now greeted the weary team.

At least the sleigh was now considerably lighter and despite their exhaustion, they powered through and sped even faster through the United Kingdom.

The wind felt thinner now and the Llama began to glide with experienced steps through the air.

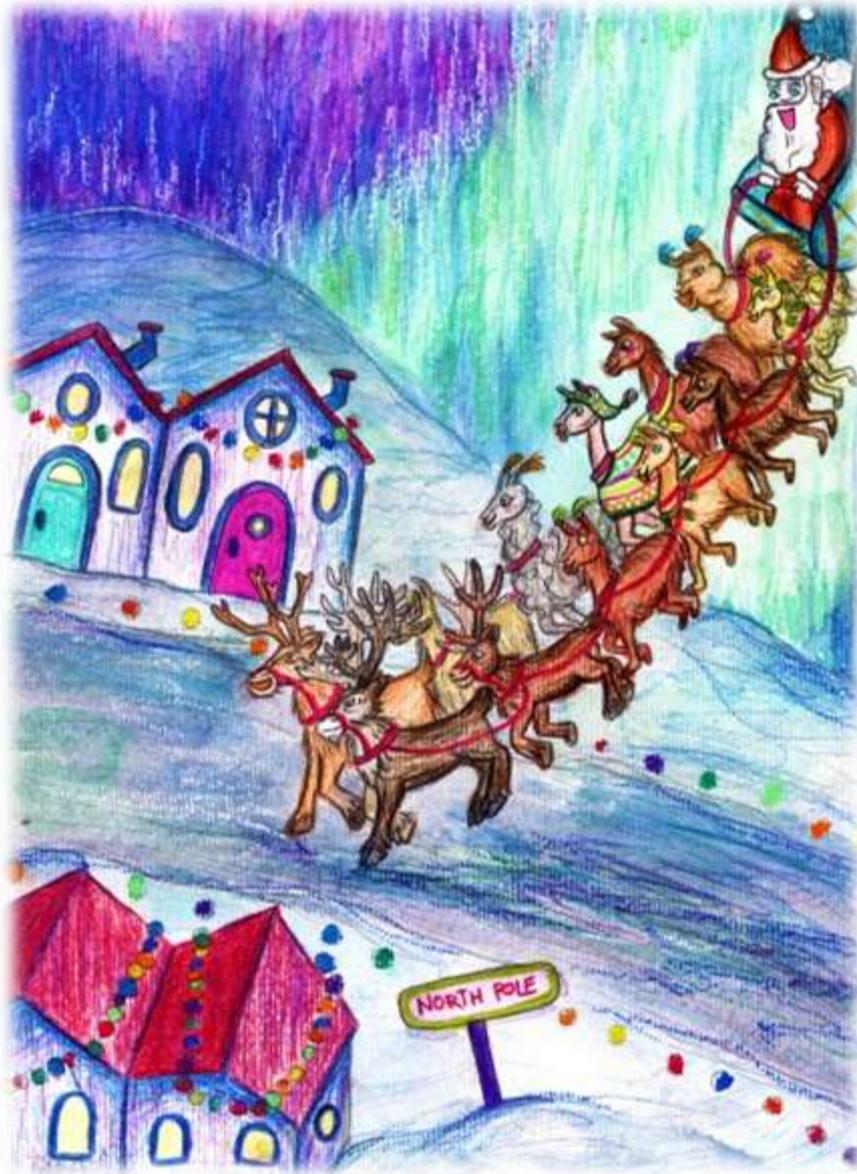
'That's it team!' yelled Santa with joy.

'You've done it! We've made it!'

The Llama smiled widely, their cheeks flapping but they didn't care.

'Nearly home, just over the horizon to the right!'

Slowing considerably and enjoying the sparkle of the magical land to the north, the Reindeer and Llama circled the multi-coloured lights of the Pole landing strip and touched down with what was now, experience and style.



They came to a stop and were met by a crowd of very excited Elves and even the poorly Dasher-who was feeling considerably better, came out to welcome the successful team home.

Santa stepped down from his sleigh, smiling more broadly than he ever had before.

Untying Blitzen and Gerald, he then went from exhausted yet elated Reindeer, to Llama to reindeer to Llama, one by one, releasing them from their harnesses, patting them and stroking them all.

'How'd it go, Santa?!' asked one of the grinning Elves.

Santa turned and beamed.

'It could not have gone better!' he replied.

Oats and water were brought to the team, who happily devoured every mouthful and swallowed every drop.

Addressing the saviours of Christmas, Santa said,

'Ladies and Gentlemen, for everything you have gone through tonight, for all the effort you have given and for the joy you have brought to all the children of the world...I cannot thank you enough. Well done one and all!'

The Elves and the Reindeer stared at the Llama.

Cheering and clapping rang out as the pride in the Llama's eyes shone brighter than the North Star above them.

'You all have a place on this team as the final leg of Christmas Eve...if you want it?' Santa offered.

The Llama looked at each other with surprise and awe. Their mouths quickly spread from ear to ear.

'Speaking for every Llama here', Sara boldly said, 'We accept!'

She smiled at Blitzen.

Blitzen, feeling a little embarrassed, stepped forward.

He wrapped his front legs, like arms, around Sara's shoulders and with passion, kissed her fully on the lips.

Sara's eyes bulged in surprise, and then relaxed in comfort and happiness.

The team laughed loudly, hoofs clapped and hands patted.

The Llama had saved Christmas for all you children of the world.

Only one question remained for the Llama, who called out in unison...

'How do we get home?'

To be continued...

Biography

David works as an English teacher in the South American country of Brazil, in a city called Porto Alegre and lives with his fiancée Clarissa and their two dogs, Joca (he's a little crazy) and Pricila (she has big brown eyes, three legs and a huge heart).

David graduated from Napier University- Edinburgh, Scotland in the mid-2000's and since then has been writing.

The Night the Llama Saved Christmas is his first book and he hopes that you all enjoy reading it as much as he enjoyed writing it.

Look out for more stories from David in the very near future.

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