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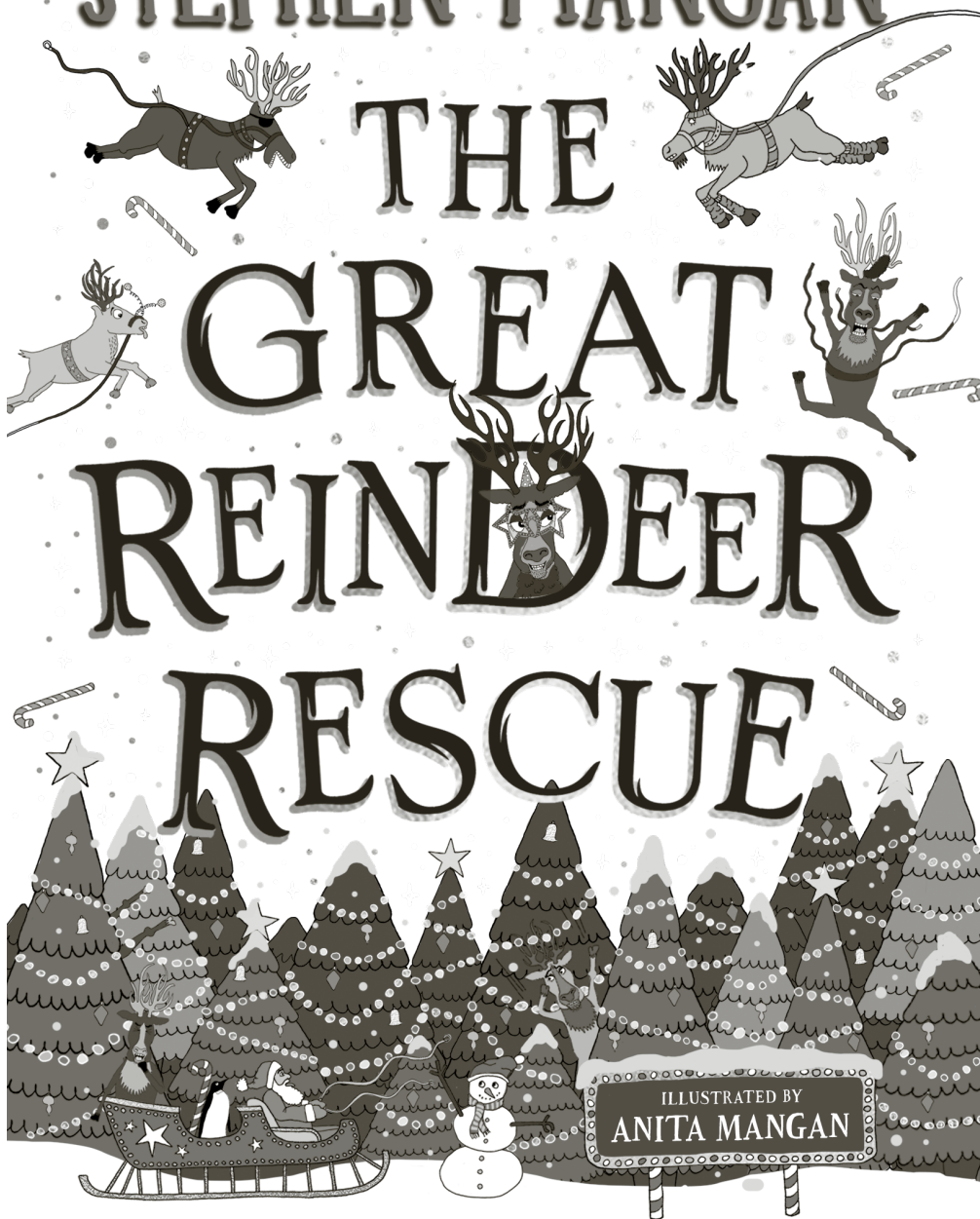
STEPHEN MANGAN

THE

GREAT

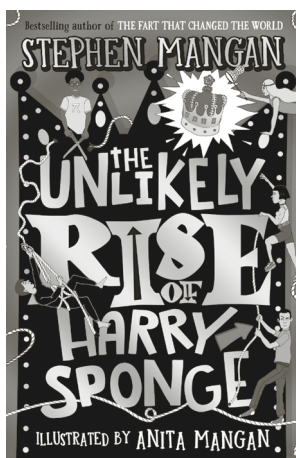
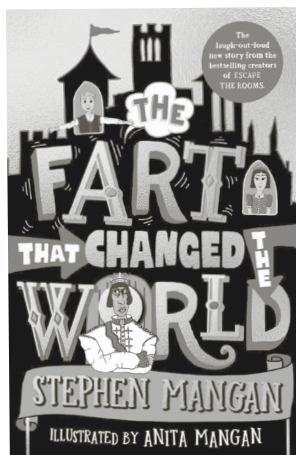
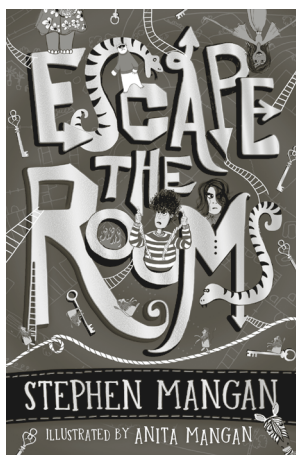
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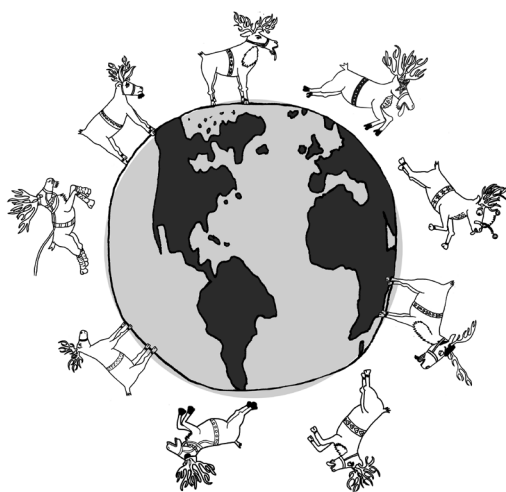
RESCUE



 SCHOLASTIC

OTHER FANTASTICALLY
FUNNY BOOKS BY
STEPHEN AND
ANITA MANGAN:





For my nephews and nieces:
Cy, Danny, Leela, Maddie,
Noah and Rohan.

CHAPTER ONE

This was his first Christmas working as one of Santa's reindeer, so Dave was nervous.



And when Dave was nervous, he talked too much.

“Ooh, look at that Christmas tree!” he exclaimed to no one in particular. **“I’ve never seen one with**

pink flashing lights before! I might do my tree like that next year. I like pink lights. You don't see them that often, do you? Pink lights? They're tremendous. So pink! And light! I normally have white lights on my Christmas tree or sometimes lots of different colours. But never pink. It never even occurred to me to have pink lights! Funny!"

The other reindeer said nothing. They weren't being deliberately rude but were simply concentrating on what they were doing – flying Santa's sleigh at great speed through the night sky. It took huge effort. Dave understood this and wished he could stop talking. But the more he wanted to stop talking, the more he talked. He couldn't help himself.

"My mum made a fairy for the top of our

tree one year,” he said. “It was a reindeer fairy, of course. It had cute antlers and wings and a sweet red bow around its neck. I made a little umbrella for it because it looked like it might *rain, dear! Get it?! Reindeer – rain, dear! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!*”

No one else laughed. It had started to snow heavily, and it was becoming difficult to see where they were going. Dave still couldn’t stop talking. He had so many questions!

“How come we can fly tonight?” he asked. “I can’t fly the rest of the time.”

“Santa harnesses the power of starlight and gravity using his magic box,” said Comet, the powerfully built but softly spoken reindeer next to him.

“Will I be able to fly tomorrow too?” Dave asked.

“Christmas Eve is the only night we fly,”
Comet said.

Comet’s parents had called him Comet because on the night he was born they’d seen a comet tearing across the sky reflected in his huge eyes. **“That’s how much we loved you, Comet,”** they used to say to him. **“A rare comet appeared and we didn’t even turn round to look at it. We couldn’t stop staring at your big, beautiful eyes.”** It was a story that brought him to tears whenever he remembered it, but he never mentioned it to any of the other reindeer. Comet was extremely shy and much more sensitive than was expected from such a big and strong reindeer.

Comet faced forward again, concentrating on running hard. Dave wondered whether Comet found him annoying or wished he’d stop

talking. To be fair, Dave also wished that Dave would stop talking, so he tried to.

He really tried hard. There were a hundred things he wanted to know, but he bit his lip.

He lasted about thirty seconds, and then he couldn't take it any more.

"Dasher?" he called out to the reindeer behind him. **"How come we can go so fast when our hooves have nothing but air to grip on to?"**

There was no response. Dave tried again but louder.

"DASHER? HOW COME WE CAN GO SO FAST WHEN OUR HOOVES HAVE NOTHING BUT AIR TO GRIP ON TO?"

"I heard you the first time," said Dasher dreamily. **"I was just thinking about how amazing it would be if I were a rockstar,**

because I'd be so rich and famous I wouldn't need to work and I could lie around doing nothing all day."

"If anyone round here is going to be a rockstar," said Rudolph, the reindeer at the front, "it's ME!"

"No, yeah, Rudolph, sure," said Dasher. "I'd love to be famous like you."

"No one will ever be famous like me," said Rudolph. "I'm Rudolph."

"Yes, you are," said Dasher. "You are Rudolph. Totally. You're the most famous. You always will be."

Rudolph snorted and tossed his head as if to say, *This conversation is over.*

In the silence that followed, Dave was wondering whether to ask Dasher his question again when Dasher said, "So, yeah, right, Dave.

You want to know how we can run so fast on air? It's all the dark matter in the universe. Dark matter is stuff that's there, but you can't tell it's there and you can't see it or feel it, but it's really there and we're running on it. Got it? Good. Now I'm going back to my rockstar daydream."

Dave hadn't really got it, but he didn't say so. It was difficult being the new one in the group. The reindeer he had replaced was Blitzen, who had retired last year. Blitzen couldn't run as fast as he used to, so Santa had gently suggested it was time for him to call it a day. Dave had got the job, much to the delight of his parents. Being one of Santa's reindeer was a sought-after position; Dave knew how lucky he was and was trying hard not to blow it.

Best not to ask any more questions, he told himself.

He lasted fifteen seconds.

“Cupid?” he asked, picking a different reindeer to bother. “**Why don’t we stop on the roof of every house?**”

“You have to, like, think about it for one second,” drawled Cupid, slowly batting her incredibly long eyelashes. Cupid was very beautiful; other reindeer were always falling in love with her. “**If we stopped on every roof on the planet, it would take sooooo long. We’d never be able to deliver presents to all the children in the world. It would take, like, aaaaages. Can you even imagine? Booooooring! So we zip at top speed down every street and over every house, and Santa is able to slow down time using his magic box—**”

“He can *slow down time*?!”

“Yes!” exclaimed Cupid. “Don’t ask me how, but he slows down time just for him so that he can run around doing loads of things in, like, a blur. I have no idea how it works. Seriously, I’m absolutely hopeless at that stuff, but as we fly over a house, he slows down time so he can jump off on to the roof, climb down the chimney, deliver the presents, eat and drink anything left out for him, maybe leave a note saying thanks, perhaps have a little nosy around (I bet he has a little nosy around – I would, I soooo would), then climb back up the chimney and hop on to the sleigh, all in less than the blink of an eye.”

“That’s why no one ever sees Santa delivering presents,” said Dancer, the reindeer wearing a headband and legwarmers in the back row. “He slows time down for *him*, but

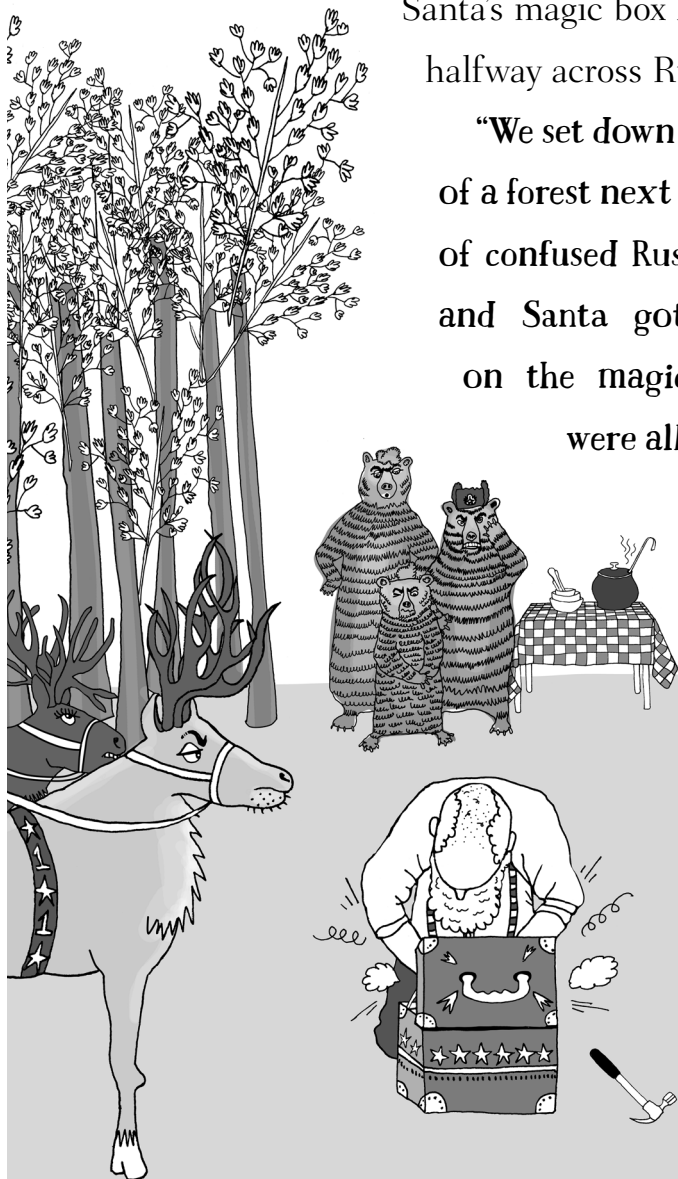
to the rest of us it all happens in a flash. I worked it out: Santa takes about a thousandth of a second to deliver presents to one home. So he delivers presents to one thousand homes every second! That's *fast!*"

Dave had kept confusing Dasher and Dancer with each other to start with because their names were so similar. He kept calling Dasher "Dancer" and Dancer "Dasher" until he realized that Dancer actually *was* a dancer. She loved ballet. When they weren't pulling Santa's sleigh, she was constantly doing warm-up exercises and stretches. Dasher, on the other hand, was nothing like his name. He never wanted to dash anywhere unless it was into bed to go to sleep. Dasher was easily the laziest reindeer Dave had ever met.

Donner, the reindeer with generous teeth

and an eyepatch in the back row next to Dancer, told Dave of the awful year when Santa's magic box had broken halfway across Russia.

“We set down at the edge of a forest next to a family of confused Russian bears, and Santa got to work on the magic box. We were all panicking.



There was no way we'd have been able to deliver even a fraction of the presents in time without that magic box. It really looked like we'd have to cancel Christmas. I'd never seen Santa so stressed. Turned out Dasher had put some cheese sandwiches and a packet of crisps in the bottom of the magic box, thinking it was a cool box!"

"WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS?" shouted Dasher. "The magic box looks exactly like a cool box, so it wasn't my fault."

"Santa was so angry," said Donner, ignoring him. "He's normally pretty red in the face, but this time he looked so red I thought he might pop."

"Let's not tell that story again, shall we?" said Dasher.

The reindeer fell silent once more as they

swooped at incredible speed over rooftops. Dave thought how amazing it would be if the other reindeer grew to like him and became his friends. Imagine Rudolph being his friend! And Cupid! Then he wondered what would happen if they all decided they *didn't* like him, and they complained to Santa about him talking all the time, and if Santa then fired him and Dave was sent home and he'd have to tell his parents and how disappointed and upset they'd be with him. Dave started to panic about this happening. He *had* to stop talking so much. But the nervous panic he was feeling made him want to talk even more.

“How can this sleigh carry enough presents for all the children in the world?” he blurted out.

“Santa has a carefully worked-out route

that passes across different storage centres,” answered Prancer, a reindeer with large eyes full of wonder and curiosity and antlers painted silver. **“It’s amazing. As the sleigh flashes over them, it’s loaded up with more presents. The preparation for Christmas takes all year.”**

Dave was surprised to hear this. He thought Santa just threw a load of presents into the back of the sleigh and set off. There was, it turned out, far more to it than that.

Rudolph, at the front, snorted and tossed his head again. He didn’t like the conversation not being about him.

“Yeah, I’m Rudolph,” he said to Dave, even though Dave already knew that. **“Santa tells me I’m the best reindeer he’s ever had, and I believe him. I’m amazing. I’m fast, I’m strong, I’ve got a great sense of direction, I look**

wonderful, my hooves are the shiniest, my coat is the smoothest, I'm the most hydrated reindeer of all time and even my farts smell like perfume. You're going to love working with me, Derek."

"My name's Dave."

"Sure. So watch and learn, Derek. Watch and learn."

Dave had to admit that Rudolph was indeed fast and strong. You had to be if you were the reindeer at the front. Rudolph had to set the pace and be able to gallop all night. If he slowed down, everyone else would slow down, and they'd never get all their deliveries done in time. And if he took a wrong turn at any point, then the whole schedule would be thrown off course. Santa was too busy jumping on and off the sleigh with presents to steer it – that

was down to Rudolph. He was an incredibly important part of the team, but didn't Rudolph know it!

As the sleigh tore through the night sky, flying fast and low over houses and blocks of flats, rivers and lakes, cities, towns and villages, Rudolph sang his favourite song loudly and tunelessly. It came as no surprise to anyone that it was a song he'd written himself.

I'm number one,

I'm number one,

That's why I'm at the front,

And you're looking at my bum.