

THE BLUE-NOSED

REINDEER

A John Justin Mallory Story

by Mike Resnick

"Bah," said Mallory, as he entered the office with a Racing Form tucked under his arm. "And while I'm thinking about it, humbug."

Winnifred Carruthers turned to him and dabbed some sweat from her pudgy face.

"You don't like the way I'm decorating the tree?" she asked.

"Christmas trees are supposed to be green," said Mallory.

"Just because they were green in your Manhattan doesn't mean they have to be green everywhere, John Justin," replied Winnifred. "Personally, I think mauve is a much nicer color." She pushed a wisp of white hair back from her forehead and stepped back to admire her handiwork- "Do you think it needs more ornaments?"

"If you put any more ornaments on it, the damned thing will collapse of its own weight."

"Then perhaps some tinsel," she suggested.

"It's just the office tree, Winnifred," said Mallory.

"If people need a detective agency, they'll come here whether we decorate the place or not."

"Well, it makes me feel better," she said. "I'd string

rows of popcorn, but . . ." She glanced at the remarkably human but definitely feline creature lying languorously on a windowsill, staring out at the snow.

"Yeah, I see your point," said Mallory. "Though she'd probably prefer that you string up a row or two of dead mice."

"I'd rather kill them myself," purred the creature.

"You do it too fast. That takes all the fun out of it."

"We're feeling bloodthirsty this holiday season, aren't we, Felina?" said Mallory.

"I feel the same as always," said Felina without taking her eyes off the falling snow.

"I think that's what I meant," said Mallory sardonically.

"I'm going to sit down for a minute or two," announced Winnifred. "I'm not the woman I was fifty years ago."

"You want me to put the star on the top?" asked Mallory. "My arms are longer."

"If you would," said Winnifred gratefully.

"You don't want to do it now," said Felina,

"Why not?" asked Mallory.

"Because you're about to have a visitor."

"You see him outside?"

She shook her head and smiled a languorous feline smile. "I hear him on the roof."

"A visitor or a thief?" asked Mallory.

"One or the other," said Felina.

Mallory walked to his desk and took his pistol out

of the top drawer, then walked to the front door and waited,

"He's not coming that way," said Felina.

"Which window?" demanded Mallory.

"None."

"There isn't any other way in," said Mallory.

"Yes there is," said Felina, still smiling.

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 287

Mallory was about to ask her what it was, when he heard a thud and an "Oof!" coming from the fireplace. He walked over and trained his gun on the huge figure that sat there, dusting soot off his bright red coat.

"Is that any way to greet a client?" said the man, staring at Mallory's pistol.

"Clients come through the front door," replied Mallory, still pointing the gun at him. "Thieves and intruders slide down the chimney."

"Slide is hardly the word," said the man. "They're building 'em narrower and narrower these days."

"Maybe you'd better explain what you're doing in my chimney in the first place," said Mallory.

"It's traditional. Now, are you going to keep aiming that gun at me, or are you going to give a fat old man a hand and maybe talk a little business?"

Mallory stared at him for another minute, then shoved the pistol into his belt and helped the huge man to his feet.

"Ah, that's better!" said the man, brushing himself

off and smoothing his long white beard. "You're the guys who found the unicorn last New Year's, and exposed that scam at the Quatermain Cup, aren't you? They say that the Mallory & Carruthers Agency is the best detective bureau in town."

"It's the only one in town," replied Mallory. "What can we do for you?"

"Who am I speaking to—Mallory or Carruthers?"

"I'm John Justin Mallory, and this is my associate, Colonel Winnifred Carruthers."

"And that T^ asked the man, pointing to Felina.

"The office cat," said Mallory. "And who are you?"

"I doubt that you've heard of me. I'm from out of town."

288 Mike Resntek

"We still need your name if we're to write up a contract," said Winnifred.

"Certainly, my dear," said the man. "My name is Nick."

"Nick the Greek?" asked Winnifred.

He smiled at her. "Nick the Saint."

"What can we do for you, Mr. Saint?" asked Winnifred.

"Call me Nick, Everybody does."

"All right. Nick—how can we help you?"

"Something was stolen from me," said Nick the Saint. "Something very valuable. And I want it back."

"What was it?" asked MaHory.

"A reindeer."

"A reindeer?" repeated Mallory.

"That's right."

"We're talking a real live one?" continued Mallory.

"Not a ceramic, or a jade statue, or . . ."

"A real live one," said Nick the Saint.

"I knew it," muttered Mallory. "Unicorns, pink elephants, and now this. Why is it always animals?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Nick the Saint.

"Never mind," said Mallory. "His name wouldn't be Rudolph, would it?"

"Actually, his name is Jasper," answered Nick the Saint.

"Not that there are a lot of reindeer in Manhattan," said Mallory, "but it would help if you could describe him, and perhaps explain what makes him so valuable."

"He looks like any other reindeer," said Nick the Saint, "Except for his blue nose, that is."

"He doesn't like dirty books?"

"This is hardly the time for humor, Mr. Mallory," said Nick the Saint severely. "I absolutely must have him back by Christmas Eve. That's only four nights off."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 289

"This nose of his," said Mallory. "What does it do—glow in the dark?"

"You know the way redshifts measure how quickly astronomical objects are moving away from you?" asked Nick the Saint. "Well, blueshifts measure how fast they're approaching. There's a lot of garbage up

there where I work—satellites and space shuttles and such—and old Jasper's nose lets me know when they're getting too close. The brighter it gets, the sooner I have to change my course to avoid a collision."

"He smells them out?" asked Mallory.

"I don't know how it works, Mr. Mallory. I just know that it does work. Without Jasper, I'm a target for every heat-seeking missile that picks me up on radar."

"I see," said Mallory. "Where did you keep Jasper? The North Pole?"

"Too damned cold up there," replied Nick the Saint. "I just use it as a mail drop. No, Jasper was stabled at the Sunnydale Reindeer Ranch just north of the city, up in Westchester County."

"How long has he been missing?"

"About three hours."

"So you haven't received any ransom requests?"

"Not yet," said Nick the Saint.

"Who runs the Sunnydale Reindeer Ranch?"

"An old Greek named Alexander."

"Have you had any disagreements with him or his staff recently?"

"Nothing that would make him want to steal a reindeer."

"Anything that might make him want to kill one?"

asked Mallory-

"Bite your tongue, Mr- Mallory! Without Jasper I'm

a sitting duck up there!"

290 Mike Resmck

"Aren't you exaggerating the danger a bit?" asked Mallory. "I always heard flying was the safest way to travel."

"Try flying over Iran and Iraq and then tell me that," said Nick the Saint.

"I'll take it under advisement," said Mallory. "And you're sure you can't think of anyone who might want the reindeer?"

Nick the Saint shook his head. "Why would anyone want to steal anything from me? I'm the friendliest guy in the world. Always got a ready ho-ho-ho, always a cheery smile, I'm the first one to put a lampshade over my head at our Christmas party . . . No, I can't think of anyone who doesn't like me."

"Well, then Jasper is probably being held for ransom," said Mallory. "Colonel Carruthers and I will see what we can do from this end, but I strongly suggest you sit by your phone. I wouldn't be surprised if you got a call in the next twenty-four hours, telling you how much they want for him and where to make the drop."

"The drop?"

"The payment."

"Then you're taking the case?" said Nick the Saint.

"Excellent! I'll go right home and wait for a call."

"Try using the door when you leave," said Mallory.

"You have no sense of style, Mr. Mallory," said

Nick the Saint.

"No, but I have a sense of economic survival," said

Mallory- "We'll require a retainer before you go."

"A retainer? And here I thought we were getting along so well."

"We'll get along even better once I know we're getting paid for our efforts."

"How much?" asked Nick the Saint.

"Five hundred a day plus expenses, and a ten per-

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 291

cent bonus if we get Jasper back to you before your deadline."

"That's outrageous!"

"No," answered Mallory. "That's business."

"All right," muttered Nick the Saint, pulling a wad of bills out of his pocket and slapping them on the desk. "But don't be surprised if all you get for Christmas is a lump of coal."

"Well, I suppose the first thing I'd better do is contact the Grundy," said Mallory.

Felina hissed.

"Must you, John Justin?" asked Winnifred. "He's so frightening."

"He's the most powerful demon on the East Coast," said Mallory. "He's the logical place to start."

"You're not actually going to his castle, are you?"

"No, I thought I'd invite him here."

"I don't want anything to do with this," said Winnifred, walking to the closet and grabbing her coat and

hat. "I hate dealing with him. I'll do some shopping."

"He was our first client," remarked Mallory.

"I didn't trust him then, and I don't trust him now," said Winnifred, walking out of the office and slamming the door behind her-

"How about you?" Mallory asked Felina. "You going or staying?"

"Staying," said the cat girl.

"Good for you."

"Oh, I'll desert you in the end, John Justin," she added. "But I'll stay for a little while."

"How comforting."

Mallory picked up a phone, dialed G-R-U-N-D-Y, and waited. A moment later a strange being suddenly

292 Mtke Resmck

materialized in the middle of the room. He was tall, a few inches over six feet, with two prominent horns protruding from his hairless head. His eyes were a burning yellow, his nose sharp and aquiline, his teeth white and gleaming, his skin a bright red. His shirt and pants were crushed velvet, his cloak satin, his collar and cuffs made of the fur of some white polar animal. He wore gleaming black gloves and boots, and he had two mystic rubies suspended from his neck on a golden chain. When he exhaled, small clouds of vapor emanated from his mouth and nostrils.

"You summoned me, John Justin Mallory?" said the Grundy.

"Yeah," said Mallory, as Felina spat and backed

away into a corner. "Ever hear of Nick the Saint?"

"A high roller from up north?" asked the Grundy.

"Owns the Kringleman Arms Hotel?"

"That's the one."

"What about him?"

"His most valuable reindeer just turned up missing," said Mallory. "I thought maybe you might know something about it."

"Of course I do."

"You've got power, money, jewels galore, everything a being devoted to Evil Incarnate could want," said Mallory. "What the hell do you need an old man's reindeer for?"

"I did not steal it, John Justin," said the demon. "I said I knew something about it."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know who stole it, of course."

"Okay," said Mallory. "Who?"

The Grundy smiled. "I'm afraid it isn't that easy, John Justin," he said. "It is your function in life to detect, and it is my function in life to exalt the evildoers and hinder the moralists."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 293

"Do you always have to sound like a professor of Philosophy 101?" asked Mallory.

"It is my nature."

"Fine, it's your nature. Now are you going to tell me who's got the reindeer or not?"

"Certainly not."

"I'm going to find it with or without your help," said Mallory. "Why not make my life easier and I'll split the fee with you."

"Making your life easier is not part of my job description, John Justin Mallory," said the Grundy. He began laughing, and as he laughed his body grew more tenuous and translucent, then transparent, and finally vanished entirely, as the last note of his laughter lingered in the air.

"Well," said Mallory, "it was worth a try."

He poured himself a drink and waited until Winnifred returned.

"Did he show up?" she asked.

"He wasn't any help."

"Is he ever?"

"I have a grudging admiration for him," responded Mallory. "Except for you, he's the only person in this Manhattan who's never lied to me."

"Well, what do we do next, John Justin?" asked Winnifred.

"I should think Nick the Saint will be getting a ransom call any minute now," said Mallory. "I mean, what the hell else is a blue-nosed reindeer good for? Still, I suppose it can't hurt to start doing a little leg-work, just to prove we're earning our fee."

"Where to?"

"The Sunnydale Reindeer Ranch seems the logical starting point," said Mallory. "I'll drive up there myself. You stay here and keep in touch with Nick the

294 Mike Resmck

Saint. Let me know as soon as someone contacts him with a demand for ransom."

"Welcome to the Sunnydale Reindeer Ranch," said the old man as Mallory walked up to the barn. "My name is Alexander the Greater."

"Greater than what?" said Mallory.

Alexander frowned. "I hate it when people ask me questions like that!"

"Well, actually I'm here to ask you some other questions," said Mallory. "I'm a private investigator, working for Nick the Saint."

"Ah," said Alexander. "You're here about Jasper."

"Right."

"Follow me," said Alexander, leading him into the barn. "There are fifty stalls, as you can see. Jasper was in Number 43, up the aisle here. When I came out to feed him this morning, he was gone."

"It snowed last night," said Mallory. "Were there any signs of footprints or reindeer tracks?"

Alexander shook his head. "Nope. It's like he disappeared right off the face of the earth."

"Has this ever happened to you before?"

"Have I ever lost Jasper before? Of course not."

"Has anyone ever robbed you before?"

"No. Most people don't even know this place exists."

"You mind if I look around?"

"Help yourself," said Alexander.

Mallory spent the next few minutes walking up and down the barn, looking into each stall. There were forty-nine reindeer, but none with a blue nose. He considered checking the surrounding area for tracks, but it had snowed again since morning and he was sure any sign of Jasper's departure would be covered by now.

Finally he returned to the old man. "I may want to ask you some more questions later on," he said.

"Happy to have the company," said Alexander.

"There's Just me and my reindeer here." Suddenly there was a loud screech. "And an occasional banshee living in the rafters," he added.

Mallory sat at his desk, taking a sip from the office bottle.

"Where do you look for a reindeer?" he said.

"Who's got the facilities to keep it while they're negotiating a price?"

"The zoo?" suggested Winnifred.

"The racetrack," said Felina.

"The dog pound?" offered Mallory.

"I suggest that we split up," said Winnifred. "We can cover more ground that way. I'll take the zoo and you take the racetrack."

"I'll take the zoo," said Mallory. "Felina and I are no longer welcome at the track since our last little experience there."

"All right," said Winnifred, checking her wrist-

watch. "We'll meet at the dog pound in, shall we say, three hours?"

"Sounds good to me."

Felina suddenly leapt across the room and landed on Mallory's shoulders, almost knocking him through the wall.

"I'm going with you, John Justin," she said happily-

"Why am / so blessed?" muttered Mallory.

296 Mike Resmck

"All right,"* said Mallory as they walked into the zoo. "I want you by my side at all times."

"Yes, John Justin," purred Felina -

"I mean it," he said. "If you cause any trouble, you're out of here."

"Yes, John Justin," purred Felina.

"Do you even know what a reindeer looks like?"

"Yes, John Justin," purred Felina.

"Why don't I trust you?" he asked,

"Yes, John Justin," purred Felina.

They passed the sphinx and the griffin, which both looked chilly in their open-air confinements, and then came to a number of students, some of them human, some goblins, a few reptilian, who were picketing the gorgon house, demanding that the four gorgons on display be returned to the wild.

"Come on, Mac," said one of the picketers, a greenish goblin about half Mallory's height. "Will you and your lady friend sign our petition?"

"She's not exactly my lady friend," replied Mallory.

"This is no time for technicalities," said the goblin.

"Surely you don't approve of keeping gorgons caged up?"

"I hadn't given it much thought," admitted Mallory.

"Well, it's time to start thinking about it, Mac," said the goblin. "Sign our petition to return 'em all to the wild."

"Where's their natural habitat?" asked Mallory.

"Africa? Asia?"

"Grammercy Park, actually," said the goblin.

There was a huge, building-jarring roar from inside the gorgon house.

"What do gorgons eat?" asked Mallory.

"Oh, you know—the usual."

"What is the usual?"

"People," said the goblin.

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 297

"How about goblins?"

"Are you crazy?" demanded the goblin. "You'd put a goblin-eating monster in the middle of Grammercy Park? What kind of fiend are you?"

The goblin glared at him for a moment, then turned and walked away, and Mallory, taking Felina by the hand, continued walking past the harpy and unicorn exhibits. When he found a keeper who had just finished feeding the unicorns, he caught his attention and called him over.

"Excuse me," said Mallory, "but where do you keep your reindeer?"

"Me?" replied the keeper. "I ain't got no reindeer. Got a dog. Got a wife who yells at me all day long. Got three sons who won't look for work and two daughters who won't look for husbands. Even got a 1935 Studebaker roadster. But reindeer? Where would I keep 'em?"

"I didn't mean you, personally," said Mallory. "I meant, where does the zoo keep its reindeer?"

"Don't rightly know that we have any," answered the keeper. "Got a pegasus, if your girlfriend is looking for pretty four-legged-type critters."

"No, we need a reindeer," said Mallory, flashing his detective's credentials. "Are you sure one didn't arrive today?"

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of one," said the keeper.

"Got a real nice Medusa in the next building, if that's to your liking."

"Who would know for sure if you had any reindeer?" asked Mallory.

"I would, and we don't," said the keeper- "By the way, you better keep an eye on your girlfriend before she falls down and hurts herself."

Mallory turned and saw Felina some thirty feet up the bole of a large tree that housed a number of ban-

298 Mike Resnick

shees, who were screaming and hurling twigs at her. She had a predatory leer on her face, and as the banshees saw that their imprecations were having no effect on her, they flew to higher and lighter branches,

with Felina following in nimble pursuit.

Mallory climbed over the fence that surrounded the tree and stood beneath it.

"Felina!" he yelled. "Get down here!"

She glanced down, smiled at him, and continued climbing—and suddenly Mallory heard an angry grunt directly behind him. He turned and found himself facing an enormous, broad-backed, elephantine creature with three heads.

"I say," said the first head, "he looks absolutely delicious. Shall we eat him?"

"He looks like he'd go very well with onions and mushrooms, and possibly a wine sauce," agreed the second head.

"We're all in agreement, then?" said the first head.

"I ain't talking to you guys," said the third head.

"Oh, come on, Roderick," said the first head. "I said I was sorry."

"Don't care," sulked the third head.

"Now see here, Roderick," said the second head.

"Reginald has apologized to you. Isn't that enough?"

"No," said Roderick. "We always agree to kill people, and then he always ends up eating them."

"It goes to the same stomach," said Reginald, "so what's the difference?"

"If there's no difference, let me eat this one all by myself," said Roderick,

"If that's what it will take to get you talking to us again," said the second head with a sigh.

"Now, just hold on a second, Mortimer," said Reginald. "Who gave you leave to make the rules? I saw him first, so it's only fair that I get to eat him."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 299

"It's not fair!" complained Roderick. "Just because I'm nearsighted, he always sees them first and gets to do the eating. I've got half a mind to crush this puny man-thing to a pulp so nobody can eat him."

"Uh, let's not be too hasty here," said Mallory, backing away toward the fence.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's bad manners to interfere in a family argument?" said Reginald. "Now please be quiet while we decide which of us is going to eat you."

"As the potential dinner, I think it's only fair that I have a say, too," persisted Mallory.

"You know, I never looked at it that way before," said Mortimer, "but of course he's absolutely right. He certainly has to be considered an involved party." All three heads turned to Mallory. "All right," said Reginald. "Which of us would you prefer to be eaten by?"

"It's a hard decision to make on the spur of the moment," said Mallory. "How about if I spend a few minutes thinking about it and get back to you?"

"All right," said Reginald. "But you have to remain in the enclosure."

"Right," chimed in Roderick. "After all, fair is fair."

Just then there was a huge amount of shrieking overhead, and Felina fell through the air and landed nimbly on the three-headed creature's back.

"I told you not to leave my side," said Mallory.

"But they looked so tasty."

"You broke your word. If I survive the next couple of minutes, you're in big trouble."

"It's not my fault," said Felina.

"Then whose fault is it?" asked Mallory.

"Uh ... I hate to interrupt," said Mortimer, "but
300 Mike Resnick

weren't we deciding which of us was going to eat you?"

"She's the reason I'm here," said Mallory disgustedly. "Eat her."

"Eat her? We can't even reach her."

"I'll get her for you," said Mallory, walking around the creature and climbing onto its back via its tail.

"Well, no one ever said they were bright," he whispered. "Can you jump over the fence from here?"

"Of course," said Felina. "Jumping is one of the very best things cat people do."

"Then would you please jump over it and bring back some help?"

"I thought you were mad at me," said Felina.

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "Right now staying alive and uneaten is more important."

"First you have to say you're not mad at me," said Felina stubbornly. "Then I'll get help."

"All right," said Mallory, wondering what his blood pressure reading was at that very moment. "I'm not mad at you."

She shook her head. "You have to say it with sweetness and sincerity."

"Hey! What's going on back there?" demanded Roderick.

"I'm just telling her I'm not mad at her," said Mallory.

"What's that got to do with anything?" said Reginald. "We're hungry."

"Felina, they're hungry^" hissed Mallory. "It's not going to take them very long to figure out that if they roll over, I'm dead meat."

"Oh, all right," she said, leaping lightly over the fence.

"Hey, she's running away!" said Roderick.

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 301

"That's all right," said Mallory. "You've still got me."

"But we can't reach you!"

"I can't tell you how sorry I am about that," said Mallory, looking across toward the unicom house, where Felina was talking to the old unicorn keeper. Finally he nodded and trudged across the sidewalk after her.

"Okay, you guys," he said when he arrived. "Let the detective go."

"Aw, we were just having a little fun with him,"

whined Roderick,

"And maybe a little lunch," added Reginald.

"You know what I've told you," said the old man.

"If you keep eating the customers, pretty soon we ain't gonna have none, and then where will we all be?"

"How about if we just eat a leg or two?" asked Roderick.

"You let him go, or there will be no PBS documentaries about your mating habits for a week," said the old man.

"No! We'll let him go!" cried Mortimer. "Get off our back now!"

Mallory slid down to the ground and raced to the fence.

"He looks kind of stringy anyway," said Roderick.

"Besides, he's a detective," added Mortimer. "Did you ever try to clean one of those?"

Mallory scrambled over the fence while the three heads were busy rationalizing their loss and telling dirty stories about the last documentary they had seen.

"Thank you," he said to the unicorn keeper,

"It's people like you that give carnivores a bad name," said the old man, turning on his heel and walking away-

302 Mike Resnick

Mallory checked his watch, saw that he just had time to meet Winnifred at the dog pound, and started walking toward his car, half-hoping Felina would stay

behind. A moment later he felt a ninety-pound weight on his back and heard a loud purring in his ear.

"I'll say this for my luck," he muttered. "It's consistent."

"No luck at the track?" asked Mallory as he met Winnifred in front of the dog pound.

"None," she said. "How about the zoo?"

"The only luck I had there is that I'm still alive."

"By the way," added Winnifred, "I checked in with Nick the Saint, and he still hasn't received a demand for ransom."

"That's damned strange," said Mallory, frowning.

"What the hell else can you do with a reindeer?"

"Eat it," suggested Felina.

"What do you think, John Jusrin?" asked Winnifred.

He shook his head. "If that was the motive, why steal the most valuable one? No one's going to eat his nose."

"Then I suggest we stop wasting time out here and check out the pound," said Winnifred.

"Just a minute," said Mallory. He led Felina back to his car, sat her down in the back seat, secured the safety belt, and then locked all the doors.

"She created problems at the zoo?" asked Winnifred when he had rejoined her.

"Not half as many as she can create at a dog pound," answered Mallory. "I know that trouble is our business, but she seems bound and determined to turn it into our hobby as well."

They walked up to the main office, where a large

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 303

shaggy man with a face resembling a Saint Bernard got up from his desk and greeted them.

"Good afternoon, dear friends," he said, drooling slightly from the corner of his mouth, "Welcome to the Manhattan Dog Pound. How may I help you?"

"We're looking for a reindeer," said Mallory.

"One with a blue nose," added Winnifred.

The man growled deep within his throat. "Why would you expect to find a reindeer here?"

"Just a hunch," said Mallory.

"Well, you're certainly welcome to inspect our premises, but I guarantee you won't find what you're looking for," said the man, starting to pant slightly.

"Let me get one of our employees to accompany you." He pressed a button on his desk, and a moment later a lean man with chalk-white skin and black spots all over it entered the room. "Tyge," he said, "please give these two visitors a tour of the premises."

"Rrrright," said Tyge. He turned to Winnifred.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Likewise, I'm sure," said Winnifred, extending her hand. Tyge took it in his own hands, held it to his nose, and took a deep sniff, then repeated the same procedure with Mallory.

"Arfter me," said Tyge, leading them through a door at the back of the office.

They found themselves in a narrow aisle between

two sets of chain-linked runs, and inside each was a man, woman, or child.

"I thought this was a dog pound," said Mallory.

"Yep, it sure is, yep, yep, yip," said Tyge. "Each of these people wants a dog for Christmas, so when any stray dogs show up, we send 'em in here and see if they want to go home with any of them."

"Back where I come from, dog pounds hold dogs, not people," said Mallory.

304 Mtke Resmck

"No dog deserves such ruff treatment," said Tyge, barking the word. His upper lip curled back, revealing a row of clean white teeth. "I never heard of anything so brutal. Imagine, putting dogs in cages and letting people choose which ones they want!"

"Different strokes," said Mallory. "Do you have any reindeer here?"

"Never heard of a reindeer wanting a dog before," chuckled Tyge. "That's a \arf"

"Then we won't take up any more of your valuable time," said Winnifred.

"It's been my pleasure, ma'am," said Tyge. "I wonder if you could do me one little favor before you leave?"

"What?"

He turned his back to her. "Could you just kind of scratch between my shoulder blades a bit?"

Winnifred reached forward and scratched.

"Now under the chin?"

Winnifred scratched again, and suddenly Tyge's left leg began shaking spasmodically.

"That's enough, ma'am," he said. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," said Winnifred, following Mallory back to the exit.

"Well, that was a waste of time," said Mallory.

"Maybe we'd better check in with Nick the Saint and see if anyone's contacted him yet."

"Maybe we'd better rescue the car first," said Winnifred, walking out into the open, for Felina had somehow worked her way loose and had three dog pound employees, each more canine in appearance than the last, cowering on the hood of the car while she grinned and displayed her claws to them.

Mallory walked behind her and encircled her with an arm, lifting her off the ground while she writhed

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 305

and spat. The three employees raced toward the safety of the pound, howling their terror.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" said Winnifred when Mallory had stuffed Felina into the car and started the engine.

Felina licked her forearm and turned her back on them.

"I'm speaking to you, young lady!" snapped Winnifred.

"I think it's going to snow again," said Felina, looking out the window.

"You know," said Mallory, who had been silent

since leaving the dog pound, "now that I come to think of it, my Manhattan wasn't so bad."

Winnifred hung up the phone. "He still hasn't gotten any ransom request."

"I think," said Mallory, "that it's about time we started considering the fact that the damned reindeer wasn't stolen for ransom, and begin examining other possibilities."

They were back in the office, and Felina had been banished to the kitchen, where she had turned on the tap in the kitchen sink and was watching, fascinated, as the water swirled down into the drain-

"I'm open to suggestions," said Winnifred. "Why else would someone steal a reindeer?"

"Not just a reindeer," Mallory pointed out. "But a blue-nosed reindeer with certain talents that none of the others had."

"The military?" suggested Winnifred. "They'd give a pretty penny to get their hands on an animal that could dodge heat-seeking missiles."

"No, I don't think so," said Mallory.

306 Mike Resnick

"Why not?"

"Because they would give a pretty penny for Jasper," he said. "If they wanted him, they'd simply appropriate the funds to buy him."

"What if Nick didn't want to sell?"

"Then they'd have found some way to confiscate him," replied Matlory.

"All right," said Winnifred. "If not the military, then who?"

"I keep going over it and over it in my mind," said Mallory, "and I keep coming up with the same answer: a competitor."

"He doesn't have any competitors, John Justin."

"Well, he does now," said Mallory. "He's without a lead reindeer, and someone else has one four days before Christmas."

"Where's the motive?" asked Winnifred. "It's certainly not profit, not if this competitor is giving away presents all over the world." She paused. "And the kind of person who has enough goodness to give them away isn't the type to steal another man's reindeer in the first place."

"What kind of person does steal Nick the Saint's reindeer four days before Christmas?" mused Mallory.

"I don't know," said Winnifred.

"I think," said Mallory, "that I'd better pay another visit to Alexander the Greater first thing tomorrow morning."

Mallory pulled his car up to the barn and got out of it.

"So you're back again?" said Alexander the Greater, walking out of the barn to greet him.

"That's right."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 307

"Got some more questions?"

"Better ones, too," said Mallory. "But first I'd like

to take another look at Jasper's stall."

"Be my guest," said Alexander. "You know where it is."

"Thanks," said Mallory.

He entered the barn and started walking past the stalls, peering into each of them. When he came to Number 43, which had belonged to Jasper, he walked right past it and down to the end of the bam, then returned to Alexander.

"You've been doing a little business, I see," said Mallory.

"Not much," answered Alexander. "Things are pretty quiet right before Christmas."

"You're too modest," said Mallory. "Just yesterday you were boarding forty-nine reindeer, and today you've only got forty-one. That means you sold eight of them since I was here."

"Well, they come, they go, you know how it is," said Alexander with a shrug-

"No I don't," said Mallory. "Suppose you tell me how it is?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Who did you sell the reindeer to?"

"That's none of your business, Mr. Mallory," said Alexander the Greater.

"As a matter of fact, I've got a feeling that it is my business," said Mallory. "Wasjt the same person who took Jasper away yesterday morning?"

"You're guessing, Mr. Mallory."

"I'm a good guesser, Alexander," said Mallory.

"For example, I'd guess that you're looking at five to ten years for aiding and abetting in the theft of Nick the Saint's reindeer. I'd also guess that I'd be willing

308

Mike Resnick

to forget your complicity if you'd supply me with the name I want."

"Not a chance," said Alexander stubbornly.

"Then I guess that I'm going to walk into your office and find it on my own."

"Two out of three ain't bad," said Alexander with a nasty grin. He put two fingers into his mouth and emitted a loud whistle, and suddenly three wiry little figures, each half the size of a grown man, raced out of the barn. "Meet my security team, Mr. Mallory," he said, indicating the three leprechauns. "Team, this is Mr. Mallory, whose presence is no longer desired here."

"We'll kill him," growled the nearest of the leprechauns.

"We'll rip his head off his shoulders," added the second.

"We'll gut him like a fish," said the third.

"There won't be enough of him left to bury," said the first leprechaun.

"We'll slice him to bits with such dexterity that we'll be awarded both ears and the tail," said the second.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," said the

third. "He'll never know what hit him."

Mallory had been retreating toward his car. Once there, he opened the door and Felina jumped out. She faced the leprechauns, grinned, and stretched out her fingers. All ten of her claws glistened in the morning sunlight.

"Of course," added the first leprechaun, "we could avoid a lot of needless violence and bloodshed and simply discuss the matter."

"Right," said the second. "Maybe we could cut a deck of cards, like gentleman. If he's low, he leaves; if he's high, he gets to inspect your records."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 309

"Besides, my lumbago's been bothering me recently," added the third leprechaun.

"Yours, too?" said the first, as Felina took a step toward them. "Suddenly my rheumatism is acting up. Must be the weather,"*

"I've got weak kidneys, myself," said the second.

"In fact," he added, "now that I think of it, I gotta go to the bathroom." He turned and raced off.

"The door sticks," said the first leprechaun, following him at a dead run. "I'll help you."

"What a bunch of cowards!" said the third leprechaun contemptuously.

"Then you propose to stay and fight?" asked Mallory.

"No, but only because my religion doesn't permit me to fight on Tuesdays. It's a matter of high moral

principle."

"This is a Friday," said Mallory.

"It is?" asked the leprechaun.

Felina grinned and nodded.

"My goodness!" said the leprechaun. "It's only four days from Tuesday! I'd better be on my best behavior, just to be on the safe side." He turned to Alexander the Greater. "Sorry, Chief, but I'm off to sacrifice a fatted lamb, if I can find one."

He turned and raced off across the landscape as fast as his muscular little legs could carry him.

"Well?" said Mallory.

"You win," said Alexander with a sigh. "I'll give you the name you want."

"I'd rather see it in black and white," said Mallory.

"Somehow I've lost my trust in this place." He turned to Felina. "Keep an eye out for the elves, and warn me if Alexander tries to leave the bam."

He went to the office, which was just inside the entrance, and started thumbing through paperwork

310

Mike Resnick

that hadn't yet been filed. Within two minutes he found what he was looking for. He put the papers in his pocket, waited for Felina to reluctantly give up waiting for the leprechauns and jump into the back seat, and drove back to town.

"You have a triumphant smirk on your face, John Justin," said Winnifred when he returned to the

office.

"Not without cause," he replied.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"I know who stole Jasper, and I think I know why," said Mallory.

"But?" she said. "It sounds like there should be a 'but*' at the end of that sentence."

"You're very perceptive," said Mallory. "I know who stole the reindeer, and I think I know why . . . but I'm not sure that justice will be served by pressing charges."

"It's your job to arrest criminals," said Winnifred. He shook his head. "It's the police's job to arrest criminals. It's our job to make our client happy, and I think I see a way to do that, but first I'm going to have to confront the thief."

"Is it safe?"

"I've met him once before, the first night I came to this Manhattan," said Mallory. "He didn't kill me then; there's no reason why he should kill me now."

"You probably didn't have information that could send him to jail then," Winnifred pointed out.

"He'll know I'm not stupid enough to have it with me," answered Mallory. "If anything happens to me, I expect you to use it."

"I don't even know what it is."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 311

"I'm about to lay it out to you," said Mallory, removing the papers from his pocket. "And then I'm

going to see what kind of deal we can make."

The Old Abandoned Warehouse was practically hidden by the thick fog coming off the East River, but Mallory knew where it was, and he knew—or thought he knew—what he would find there. He parked in a lot about three blocks away, then walked past a row of bars and restaurants catering to goblins and a strip joint promising that Slinky Scaly Sally would shed everything, even her skin, to make her reptilian audience happy, and finally he came to the unmarked door that he sought, and knocked on it.

"Who's there?" demanded a deep voice.

"John Justin Mallory."

"You got an appointment?"

"No," answered Mallory. "You got a good lawyer?"

The door squeaked open, and Mallory found himself confronting a huge blue-skinned man in a purple sharkskin suit, light blue shirt, violet tie, and navy blue shoes and socks. He stood just under seven feet tall, and weighed in the vicinity of five hundred pounds.

"Well, well," said the Prince of Whales. "So the Grundy hasn't killed you yet."

"Have you got some place where we can sit down and talk?" asked Mallory.

"Why do I want to talk to you?" asked the Prince of Whales. ,

"Because I know all about the blue-nosed reindeer."

"People have died for saying less than that to me,"

said the Prince of Whales.

"Yeah, I suppose they have," answered Mallory.

312 Mike Resnick

"But they were stupid people. They probably didn't tell you up front that whatever they had on you would be turned over to the police if you laid a finger on them."

The Prince of Whales glared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "All right, shamus," he said.

"Follow me."

He led Mallory through the enormous warehouse to a small office built into a corner of it, then ushered him inside.

"Drink?" he said, holding up a bottle containing a blue liquid with scores of small fish swimming around in it.

"I'll take a pass," said Mallory, sitting down.

"Good," said the Prince of Whales. "There's that much more for me, then." He lifted the bottle to his lips and drained its contents, fish and all.

"Do they tickle when they go down?" asked Mallory curiously.

"Not so's you'd notice it," answered the Prince.

"Now cut the chatter and let's talk deal."

"What makes you think I'm here to offer you a deal?"

"If you weren't, you'd have sent the cops," answered the Prince. "So let's have it."

"Okay," said Mallory. "Let me start with what I

know."

"That shouldn't take long."

"I know that you leased eight reindeer from Alexander the Greater this morning. I know you took them away with you. I know the lease expires in a week,"

"And that's it?" asked the Prince.

"Not quite," said Mallory. "I know you're the biggest fence in Manhattan."

"Everyone knows that," said the Prince of Whales, "but they ain't never proved it in court."

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 313

"Now let me tell you what I think," continued Mallory.

The Prince of Whales reached into his pocket, pulled out a penny, and tossed it to the detective.

"For your thoughts," he said.

"I think that they're getting awfully close to proving it," he said. "I think you've gotten word that sometime shortly after Christmas they're going to raid your warehouse, before you have a chance to hide or unload your merchandise."

"You think so, do you?" said the Prince.

Mallory nodded. "And I think you saw a way to get rid of your inventory right out in the open, where nobody would even dream of trying to stop you." He paused. "I think you stole Jasper and leased the other reindeer so that you could dump all your illegal goods on Christmas Eve. After all, who arrests Santa Claus for giving away millions of presents? And so what if

this year there are a few more video recorders and toasters and boom boxes and a few less toys? Most of the people will be just as happy, and when the bust comes in a week or two, your warehouse is empty and nothing can be traced back to you. You won't even have the reindeer, and I've got a hunch that Alexander will suddenly find poor old Jasper grazing in some nearby forest, where everyone will assume he's been living for the past week."

The Prince of Whales stared at him for a long moment.

"You're pretty good," he said. "I'll give you that.

You got everything but the tax angle."

"Tax angle?"

"It's the locals who are trying to bust me for fencing. The Feds don't care what I do as long as I pay my taxes. I figured to deduct a couple of billion dollars for charitable contributions after I made the rounds on Christmas Eve. I could carry that forward for the next twenty years on my taxes."

"Maybe you still can," said Mallory.

"Okay," said the Prince of Whales. "You talk, I'll listen. What's the deal?"

"What if I can get my client to agree to drop all charges against you?"

"What's 't gonna cost?"

"First, you have to return Jasper today," said Mallory. "I assume he's somewhere in the warehouse?"

"Yeah, he's back there with the others in a bunch of stalls I made up. What else?"

"My client is a tough old bird, and I don't know if simply returning the reindeer is enough," said Mallory. "But if you sweeten the pot by turning over all your goods to him and letting him dump them on the market on Christmas Eve, I think he might go for it."

"He'll sign a document certifying that I gave them to him free of charge?"

"I think he will. Anything he doesn't use this year, he can use next time around." He paused. "Do we have a deal?"

"You bet your ass we have a deal, Mallory!" said the Prince of Whales. "The only part of this scam I didn't like was flying around behind those goddamned reindeer. I'm scared to death of heights."

"All right," said Mallory, walking over to the phone. "Let me talk to my client and make sure he's willing."

The deal was official ninety seconds later.

"Bah," said Mallory. "And while I'm at it, humbug."

"What now. John Justin?" asked Winnifred.

THE BLUE-NOSED REINDEER 315

"Here it is Christmas Eve, and that old geezer hasn't come up with our expense money or our bonus yet. That's a hell of a note, considering who he is."

"You'd just spend your share betting at the track, anyway," said Winnifred.

"Well, there's an elephant called Flyaway running at Jamaica tomorrow," admitted Mallory. "I've got a hunch."

"Didn't you once tell me that you bet a horse called Flyaway in your Manhattan some ten or fifteen times and never won?"

"Eighteen," admitted Mallory. "But it's such a great name. The name alone is due to win."

"I'm glad you attack our cases with more intelligence than your wagers," said Winnifred.

"He's here," announced Felina, who had been sleeping atop the refrigerator.

"Who's here?" asked Mallory.

"The blue-nosed reindeer."

"How can you tell?"

Felina smiled. "Cat people know things that humans can never know," she purred.

Suddenly there was a small clanking noise in the fireplace, and Winnifred walked over to it.

"Well, it looks like he kept both promises," she said, picking up a small parcel.

"What do you mean?" asked Mallory.

"This," she said, holding up a roll of bills, "is for us. I'll take it over to the bank and put it in the night deposit window." She paused. "And this," she added, tossing him a small object, "is for you."

Mallory caught it and examined it with a wry grin on his face,

It was a lump of coal.