

It was the night before the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature...

Quiet at the back!

We're trying to tell a story here! All through the house not...

Pipe down!

All through... Forget it. All through the house, everyone was making a racket. The cats were screeching, the mice were attacking the cheese and the children were plotting trouble. Particularly Sam, the 10-year-old, reckless-natured boy who lived in the tall town-house at the end of Brick Lane. His father was due to fly back into town that night and his mother was busy having what she referred to as Hysterics.

"The turkey's burnt!" she wailed down the phone to her sister Augmentia. Sam's aunt was currently on holiday in Tenerife with her new boyfriend. "We've got Gareth's parents coming down for dinner tomorrow and the turkey's burnt, the sprouts have sprouted and there are more eyes on the potatoes than at a farmer's market!"

Sam sighed. How could she expect him to get anything done with the culinary equivalent of a brass band erupting downstairs? Sam had plans, big plans. He'd been speaking to his best friend Annabelle all week about the best way to do what he needed to do and now he was close. He was going to capture one of Santa's reindeer.

"Rudolph would be best," he'd said to Annabelle when she'd first suggested the idea, "he's got a built in headlight. One of the others would be fine though, we could always use some tape to attach my dad's torch to its head." Annabelle had been very impressed. He'd been quite offended, it wasn't the first brilliant idea he'd ever had. True, his endeavours to measure the speed of light with a stolen police speed camera had failed miserably and his parachute experiment with his aunty's enormous underpants had been a spectacular mishap. He was only grateful they'd thought to test them first with his pet hamster, rather than him or Annabelle. This time, he knew, it would be different.

Preparation would be key to the plan's success. "To fail to prepare is to prepare to fail!" their teacher often said. And they knew there was no chance they'd catch Rudolph or Blitzen or anyone else without a solid plan. If their plan had been any more solid, Sam knew, you would have been able to use it to build houses.

Leaving his mother still shrieking into the handset ("And just what am I going to do for pudding? The strawberry fool isn't fooling anyone!"), Sam made his way to the garden shed. On the way, he threw a small stone at the upstairs window of the adjoining house and by the time he'd made it to the bottom of the garden, Annabelle had left her bedroom and caught up with him. She'd brought with her a large burlap sack that filled the small wooden space with a smell of mushrooms.

"Left-overs from the market," she said with undisguised glee when she opened the top for Sam to see inside.

"Excellent!" Sam smiled back. "There's just one thing left." He grabbed a saw from his father's workbench and scrambled to the top of a rickety step-ladder until he could reach the roof. As he started to saw through the wood, a pile of sawdust started to form in the middle of a cage made from bamboo canes and string.