

# CHRISTMAS IN THE CAGE

BY SALLY GREEN

I'm supposed to be cleaning out the chicken coop. But sometimes I just don't want to do what I'm supposed to, whatever the consequences. So I'm standing here watching the hens feed, just for a minute or two, thinking . . . coming up with a new plan.

I've not been told, but I've worked it out that we always have my monthly assessments on the 21st of the month, and that was four days ago. I've also noticed that the only meat in the pantry is sausages, the same sausages we've been having for the last two weeks. So my new plan is a different kind of plan. As with most of my plans the chance of success is minimal but looking at the bright side, when it goes wrong, so what? Life can't get much worse.

I grab the fattest hen by its feet, it flaps its wings furiously for a second or two but quietyens as soon as it swings upside down. I reach out my left hand –

'What're you doing?' Celia asks as she comes round the corner of the cottage. My left hand grabs the hen's warm neck and head and pulls.

'No, Nathan!' Celia barks but she's too late and knows it. I expect her to use her Gift on me, to bring me to my knees with her magical sound, but instead she steps close to me and I take a step back, out of reach, I hope.

'I didn't say you could kill that.' Her voice is even quieter than usual, which is a sign that she's really seething and I have to tread carefully.

I take another half step back, holding the chicken out between us and I say, 'It's Christmas Day isn't it?' She blanks me, as if that information is too dangerous for me to have. I continue, 'So, I thought we'd celeb– I thought I'd cook roast chicken.'

We have chicken once a month on the first of the month (I've worked that out too). That's when I normally kill and pluck and pull all the innards out of whichever hen Celia selects.

'What makes you think I haven't ordered a turkey?' she asks. That's her idea of a joke. Her voice is still very quiet.

'Didn't see one in the pantry, thought you must have forgot.' And as I get to the 't' of 'forgot' she hits me: a sharp punch to the side of my face. I stagger to the side, blood in my mouth. Fuck!

She's not used her noise on me though, which is a good sign.

I heal my face and stand straight, the chicken still hanging between us.

She says, 'Is that the biggest hen, the best layer?'

'Yeah but it's dead now anyway. So I might as well-'

Another punch, harder and faster. I didn't see that coming at all. And another and I'm on my knees. Her boot slams into the ground where my face was as I coil and roll away. Shit! Her boot comes at me again as I roll again and get back onto my feet like she's taught me. But then I get her elbow in my face. I stagger back but at least I manage to stay on my feet. The chicken is on the ground.

'You need to get faster,' she says and then she points at the chicken, adding, 'It better be the best roast dinner I've ever tasted.'

I heal my bloody nose and retrieve the carcass, trying not to grin. Yes! The plan has worked, sort of. Roast chicken for dinner!

'You can finish cleaning the coop first. And then do two circuits – the outer ones.'

I don't answer or nod or 'yes sir' her, I just get on with stringing the chicken up and plucking the feathers off. It's a good size carcass, should be a great meal.

Celia watches me all the time, whilst I'm preparing the chicken, whilst I'm cleaning the coop, times me on my runs and then as soon as I'm back from the second one and I'm still bent over hands on knees breathing hard, she says, 'Now we'll do some hand-to-hand. If you beat me I'll let you eat your half of the chicken.'

I turn my head up to look at her. I can tell she's not in the mood to let me win: she's in the mood to make sure I don't even land a punch. I stretch up and flex my shoulders and neck, wondering if I can beat her this time. I say, 'So if you win I get no chicken, and if I win I get half the chicken? Doesn't sound fair.' I pause then dare to add, 'And I know you love to be fair.'

'Fair would be me breaking your right arm for not cleaning out the coop when you were first told, and your left for killing the best layer without permission.' She rolls her shoulders and gets into her fighting stance and says, 'I'm letting you off punishment because it's that special time of the year.'

'Peace and goodwill to all men,' I mutter, raising my fists.

I do manage to land a couple of hits, two good punches and a kick to her stomach that has to hurt.

But in the end I have a vegetarian Christmas. I'm not even allowed any gravy, though I have to make it all and watch her stuff her face. She mops her fat lips clean of grease and says, 'Praise where praise is due, Nathan, that was a good chicken and well cooked. And it looks like there's enough meat left for stew tomorrow – for those of us who've earned it.'

At that I lose my rag and throw the metal oven tray at her.

So all that means I'm fasting on Boxing Day: the oven tray sliced across Celia's nose, which I'm still rather proud of. It took her by surprise, which is hard to do. A small victory. But the price is that I'm not allowed out of the cage all Boxing Day. It's a long, cold day to be chained up doing nothing but thinking, and when the rain arrives brought by a cold wind, I can only protect myself from by covering myself with the sheepskins in the northwest corner of my cage.

I've spent the day remembering things from my past: my school, my home and my family. Last Christmas Gran cooked a massive turkey, with me, Deborah and Arran helping her, all our cheeks red with the heat. Jessica didn't come home for the holidays, which made it even more perfect. We ate too much and had fun, smiling over our huge stomachs, Arran teasing Deborah, me teasing Arran, Gran telling stories about Christmases past. And afterwards Arran watched an old movie on telly, his favourite one that he always watched.

And here in my cage I'm curling up as if I'm on the sofa, Arran's arm lying over me, my eyes closing as I fall asleep, and the guy in the movie is talking to the other guy telling him how wonderful life is. And Arran knows all the lines off by heart, saying them as the actor says them:

'Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many others. He leaves an awful hole when he's gone.'

- THE END -