

# One

AS TASH FRENCH FLUSHED the lavatory after her early morning pee, a large icicle fell on to her head.

‘Great. That’s just . . . great.’

She was vaguely aware, as she staggered from the icy bathroom back to her fuggy, creased duvet and Niall’s spread-eagled limbs, that there was a large white turkey peering at her through the lop-sided cat-flap at the base of the stairs, far too fat to fit the rest of its ample feathered bulk into the chilly comfort of the house. The rattling ground-floor windows were now too opaque with frosted condensation for it to look through those.

‘Fattened for Christmas,’ she murmured to herself as she carefully inserted her frozen extremities underneath Niall’s warm, heavy legs and kissed his falcate, suntanned nose. In sleep, the long, curly eyelashes flickered as though stirred by a sigh and he burped mildly.

Christmas. The realisation finally hit Tash after an hour’s fitful dreaming about Brussels sprouts, mistletoe and the latest festive Cliff Richard hit.

‘Niall!’ She sat bolt upright, her head reeling. The effort was too much and she sank back to the pillows with a groan, clutching her thumping brow.

‘Mmmm?’

‘What day is it?’

‘Today, angel.’ He stretched his stubbly face across to hers and, without opening his eyes, planted a sleepy, hungover kiss on her mouth. ‘It’s today, I think.’

‘And would this “today” bear a passing resemblance to a certain important date in our religious calendar?’

‘Give me a clue?’ He was drifting back to sleep again, his sandpaper chin resting in the hollow of her neck.

‘Like, yesterday was Christmas Eve.’ Tash moved away to the edge of the bed.

‘Ah.’ Niall pulled a pillow over his head, one hairy armpit quivering as it was exposed to the frosty cold of the room.

‘And my mother, step-father and Matty’s unruly crew are due here for lunch.’

‘Great,’ came a muffled moan. ‘What time is it?’

‘Just after ten.’ Tash squinted across to her watch, which was propped up between two dirty mugs on the bedside table.

‘Good.’ He resurfaced, stubble grazing her shoulder. ‘That gives us time for a shag.’

‘I’m freezing, Niall.’

‘In that case,’ he started to kiss his way down the rungs of her ribcage, ‘let me show you what the Irish call central heating.’

After a lovely and slow, if rather fuzzy-headed, coupling, hangovers clearing, Niall pressed his lips into her moist stomach as Tash stretched across to gather up her watch.

‘By the way, there’s a very ugly white turkey outside.’ She winced as she read the time.

‘Yeah – we won him last night at the Olive Branch party – don’t you remember?’

‘I have a merciful blank after Marco Angelo started singing “The Girl From Ipanema”, wearing nothing but a tea-towel and Jack Fortescue’s deerstalker.’

‘Yeah.’ Grinning, Niall sagged back on the pillows. ‘Great party, huh?’

‘Glad you enjoyed it.’ Tash winced again as she vaguely recalled regaining consciousness whilst being carried back the one hundred yards from the Olive Branch to the Old Forge by their kindly local publican, who was anxious to get to midnight mass. Come to think of it, she did seem to have a fleeting impression of Niall reeling around in a nearby ditch carrying a huge white turkey at the time. She had simply assumed she was hallucinating.

‘What are we supposed to do with it?’ she asked weakly.

‘Well, as it’s the day of our Saviour’s birth and your greedy family are due for lunch in just over an hour, I’d recommend inviting it in to pull a cracker,

wouldn't you?' Dark curls falling into his half-closed eyes, Niall staggered into the loo.

Tash was waiting anxiously outside when he emerged.

'I don't want you to kill it,' she pleaded.

'Fine.' Niall grinned lazily, kissing her on the forehead as he passed on his way down to the kitchen. 'I honestly don't think I'm up to it now, anyway. You go ahead – he's all yours. Hi there,' he added as he passed the cat-flap, from which an unspeakably ugly white face was peering, red eyes watering from the cold, caruncle hanging jauntily to one side like a slipping court jester's hat.

'I'm not going to kill it!' she protested, dashing after him.

'No, well then, there's no problem now, is there?' Having banged around in several cupboards for an Alka-Seltzer, Niall was searching the fridge for mineral water. The pipes were once again frozen, reducing the taps to a pitiful, burping dribble.

'Fine.' Tash sank down at the stone-topped table, her bottom making contact with a freezing cast-iron chair. 'Anyway, I bought a ready-stuffed, self-basting, idiot-proof frozen one – I guess I should bung it in the Rayburn as soon as I've translated the Paxo instructions.' She reached for her fags.

'Ah, now there's a thing.' Niall made do with dissolving two hangover tablets in Budweiser as the taps had now seized up completely, and there was nothing else to drink. 'Would this

be a self-defrosting one too?'

'Shit!'

Tash watched in horror as Niall flipped open the freezer door with his knee to reveal several ancient pizzas, a bag of frozen peas, two empty ice-trays, a bottle of vodka and a vast idiot-proof turkey, as solid and frozen as a corpse in a glacier.

'Tash – she is a good cook, *non?*' Pascal asked as he cranked the hired Mercedes through a requiem of gears and crawled along in the Christmas Day traffic on the M6, his large Gallic nose wrinkling in anticipation of the gourmet treats ahead.

'I think so, darling,' his wife Alexandra answered distractedly as she frantically tried to wrap up presents in the passenger seat, sticking more Sellotape and gift tags to herself than to her gifts.

Their precocious eight-year-old daughter, Polly – squashed in the back seat with a very young, very nauseous puppy and a very old, very regal grandmother – was busy pulling revolting faces through the rear window at the shocked occupants of the car behind.

'Tell Polly to stop that, will you, Mother?' Alexandra reached for the Sellotape which was hooked on to the gear-stick just as Pascal tried to change into fifth.

'I'll do no such seeng, darleeng,' muttered Etty Buckingham, turning around and joining her grand-daughter in her tongue poking fun, her grandiose fur hat falling on to her regal nose.

The skinny, biscuit-coloured puppy, anxious to join in, reeled around too and vomited liberally on to Pascal's cashmere jersey which Polly had been using as a knee cushion.

Matty French sulkily changed the wheel on his Audi as his wife crouched fearfully by the boot, pretending to read the *AA Road Map*.

'I think we're somewhere near Stroud,' she suggested hopefully as a wheel bolt flew past at nose level. 'Or it could be closer to Bristol. Hard to tell when everything's so white.'

'That's just fucking great,' hissed Matty, his fingers turning blue as he yanked at a stubborn nut. 'Tash and Niall live in Berkshire.'

'Oh, we came through there!' Sally realised excitedly, consulting the map again.

'I fucking know,' Matty hissed. His rather idiotic crocheted skullcap – a present from his long-suffering PA which he felt obliged to wear – rather lost

him the edge when it came to patriarchal tyranny. He looked like a very trendy Hackney social worker searching for his inner child.

‘Daddy said fucking!’ chorused two excited small children from the warmth of the rear seat.

‘Twice!’ added the eldest, Tom, who could count.

The Frenches’ third child, Linus, burst into noisy sobs as the car shook underneath his carry cot. He was wearing a large, colourful felt bonnet in the shape of a crocodile, his face protruding from its mouth as though recently swallowed.

Giving up on the map, Sally gazed delightedly at the paper-doily hedgerows and the frosted grass, spearing up in the cold, dry air like a rigid, peroxide-white punk hairdo.

‘‘I’m dreaming,’’ she sang tunelessly, ‘‘of a—’’

‘‘White Chrithmath!’’ sang three-year-old Tor, who had recently added those two words to her repertoire of about twenty – most of them swear words.

‘No, it is *not*,’ muttered Matty, ever the pedant, particularly when, as now, his tether was nearing its end faster than a bolting goat’s. ‘White Christmases are so-called because it has snowed, covering everything totally in white. This is a sharp frost, which gives an appearance of snow but will fade as soon as it warms up.’

‘Which, if the weather parallels your father’s mood,’ Sally said idly, ‘will be sometime in March. I think we should get a place in the country, Matty. It’s so beautiful.’ Closing her eyes, she stabbed a dreamy finger into the map. ‘We should buy a tumble-down brick and flint cottage in – er – Maccombe.’

‘Don’t move your finger!’ Matty wailed, another wheel nut flying over his shoulder.

‘Whyever not?’ Sally looked up at him excitedly through her messy blonde fringe, wondering whether he was going suddenly, recklessly, to take her up on her idle dreams, a challenge he hadn’t risen to since very early on in the heady idealism of their marriage. A cottage, an overgrown garden, local pub, fossil-like colonel, ancient jam-making spinsters, gymkhanas, coffee mornings . . . bucolic bliss! Yes, let’s do it, Sals. Let’s go ahead for the hell of it.

But Matty’s big hazel eyes were narrowed, the retroussé nose still looked out of joint, and the wide, usually gentle mouth was set in a line as straight as a Roman road.

‘That bastard Beauchamp lives in Maccombe.’ Matty located the nut in a nearby patch of crisp, frozen hog grass. ‘Tash’s village is pretty near, I think. Fosbourne something. Look for Fosbourne.’

Sally sighed sadly and looked. ‘There’s a Fosbourne Holt here, and Fosbourne Dean.’ Her finger homed into a corner of the map close to Maccombe. ‘And a Fosbourne Dewkis.’

‘Ducis!’ Matty corrected. ‘It’s pronounced “dew-sis”. You should know that. We’ve been there twice, after all.’

‘Mmm, over a year ago,’ Sally reminded him regretfully, wondering why he was so uptight.

‘I wish to Christ we’d left it longer to go back,’ Matty added tetchily under his breath. He hoped beyond hope that Zoe Goldsmith wouldn’t make an appearance today.

‘This isn’t working.’ Tash turned off her hairdryer and gazed forlornly at the idiot-proof turkey. ‘It’s still frozen solid.’

Niall, who had managed to gather enough icicles from the guttering to boil a pan and thus defrost the pipes, was blowing the froth from his hard-earned coffee and watching her with amusement.

‘Sorry, Giblets, my son.’ He looked across to the cat-flap from which a grubby beak still protruded. ‘Your number’s up. Twenty-five pounds, twenty-five days into December, twenty-five minutes now until Tash’s mother’s due to arrive.’

‘Twenty-five minutes!’ Tash gaped at her watch in horror. ‘I must get dressed.’

‘Stay as you are.’ Niall wrapped her in a hug. ‘I like to see you in the just-got-out-of-bed look. I find the idea of ripping off three jumpers, two t-shirts, two pairs of leggings, two pairs of socks and an old school scarf deeply exciting.’

‘Do you think they’ll mind that the heating’s packed in?’ Tash hugged him back for warmth.

‘I’ll light a fire.’

By the time she came back out of the bedroom dressed in a very warm trouser suit over her very warm thermals, with her hair sodden and her nose blue from an icy shower, Niall was immersed in some old newspapers that he had extracted from the coal cupboard as kindling for the fire, and had become so engrossed in reading that the fire was still unlit. The vast, black-stained forge hearth was still filled with soot, ashes, cigarette stubs and sweet wrappers.

Tash’s eyes softened as she gazed at him. His curling black hair, in desperate need of a cut, was flopping all over his stubbled face, milk-chocolate eyes crinkling as he laughed at an A. A. Gill column dating back to September.

He’d had so little time to read the papers in the last few months, she realised; particularly the English ones that he adored, having spent so long filming in America, where his super-luxury trailer had been stuffed with scripts to be rejected. Here he was, dressed in nothing but a ratty striped dressing gown and bed socks, hair on end, knees supporting a Sunday supplement as he stooped over an old television crit, guffawing as though he had watched the programme yesterday and agreed with every word. To Niall, everything was as fresh as he was, however jaded it – and he – appeared. He was the only man she knew who still laughed uproariously at old Marx Brothers jokes, and she loved him for it.

‘Merry Christmas.’ She held out a slightly damp package which she had just wrapped in the bathroom. She had forgotten to buy wrapping paper again this year, but doubted that he would recognise one of their drawer liners.

Niall looked up, his eyes uncrinkling for a moment.

‘You look beautiful,’ he sighed, taking in the red velvet suit, the long, long legs and wet, snaky brown hair curling over her huge, odd, blinking eyes and framing her lovely cleft chin.

She smiled shyly. ‘Open it then.’

As he ripped at the package, Tash wandered across to the paint-stained portable radio that had been her only company when splashing white Dulux on the brick walls of the Old Forge six months ago, and surfed the dial until she found some carols.

‘This is bloody wonderful!’ Niall laughed as a flutter of poppy-strewn, damp paper finally landed on the floor and he held up a tiny miniature painting of them both together, framed in a fat, peeling antique gilt square.

Tash, puce with embarrassment, listened to a couple of bars of ‘Good King Wenceslas’.

‘You don’t think it’s a bit naff?’ she asked nervously.

She had spent agonising hours the week before deciding whether or not to give it to him, and had only finally been persuaded when Gus and Penny, her dearest friends, had frog-marched her into the antique shop in neighbouring Fosbourne Dean and forced her to buy a frame – far more expensive than she could afford – insisting that if she didn’t give it to him, they would sack her from her post as their working pupil.

‘It’s simply wonderful,’ Niall sighed, echoing their words of a week earlier. ‘And so small that I can take it with me wherever I work. Christ, I love you, Tash French.’

When she finally surfaced from a kiss far too long and raucous for one of Niall’s standard celluloid love-scenes, she noticed a pair of red eyes peering at her critically through the cat-flap.

‘Do you think we should let him in and give him something to eat?’ she asked worriedly as Giblets let out an outraged gobble.

‘Sure.’ Niall shrugged, still staring at the painting in awe. ‘God, this is great.’

‘What the hell are we going to do for lunch?’ Tash peered into the open-plan kitchen where three pounds of Brussels sprouts were still sagging from a hanging vegetable rack, confined in their plastic string supermarket bag with

the lurid discount voucher on full show. ‘Brussels sprout quiche?’ She let in Giblets, who headed straight for the fireplace in disorientated excitement.

‘We could.’ Niall shrugged again. ‘Or you could dash along to Penny and Gus’s place and see if they can spare any extras, while I stay here and light a fire.’ He propped the painting against a photograph of Tash and her event horse, Foxy Snob, taking a huge stone wall at last year’s Highclere Horse Trials. Coaxing Giblets from the fireplace, he lit a cigarette in anticipation of the task ahead.

‘I can’t impose on them on Christmas morning,’ Tash said worriedly. ‘And they can hardly cut their turkey in half.’

‘Afternoon.’ Niall checked his watch. ‘And why not? You can wish Snob and Hunk a Merry Christmas, and give the Moncrieffs their presents.’ He nodded towards a large Selfridge’s bag propped up by the door. ‘We forgot to take them to midnight mass last night.’

‘We went to midnight mass?’ Tash looked confused.

‘Mmm.’ Niall nodded, heading back to the fireplace and throwing in his half-smoked cigarette. ‘At least I think we did. Why in hell didn’t you just take that cigarette off me, Tash? You know I’ve given up.’

‘You’re supposed to tell me to take them off you first, remember?’ Tash, feeling slightly baited, headed for the door and stepped into her wellies as she reached for her ancient Puffa, which was oozing its lining through the tears like a clawed cushion. ‘I’m not acting as fag cop without instruction since you locked yourself in Tom’s bedroom with a packet of Rothmans at Sally’s thirtieth.’

‘You looked so sweet when you were soaked through – like a mermaid.’

‘The terrapins weren’t so chuffed to find themselves on dry land once their home had been deposited on me, though.’ Tash pulled on her gloves sulkily.

Niall looked sheepish. ‘Sorry.’

She grinned, able to forgive him anything when he looked at her like that. ‘I’ll see you in half an hour.’