

Chapter One Extract for My Weekly / *That Festive Feeling* by Heidi Swain

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the sofa, surrounded by a plethora of packing boxes when my mobile rang out, making me jump and pulling me out of the reverie I hadn't realised I'd fallen into.

'Dad,' I answered, my tone an octave higher than I would have liked and definitely far too bright. 'Hey. Is everything okay?'

It said a lot about our relationship that I had assumed there must be something wrong for him to be calling just a few days after our last interaction. And yes, I know interaction might seem an odd choice of word to describe a conversation with my parents, but no one who knew them would think that. My parents and I didn't go in for idle chit-chat. I doubt they would even know what the word meant.

'Yes,' Dad briskly said. 'Everything's fine.'

He didn't say anything further and I checked my phone to make sure the call hadn't been cut off.

'So,' I prompted, dragging the word out. 'You're ringing because . . .'

'Your mother asked me to,' he eventually said. 'She would have rung herself but she's been called in to attend an unscheduled departmental meeting.'

'I bet she was thrilled about that,' I commented, knowing how much she abhorred anything unplanned.

Both my parents were university lecturers. Mum was physics and Dad was maths. Their entire lives, their very essence, was ground in logic and fact and they didn't allow an iota of space for imagination or adventure. I supposed that was why they had always found me, their only child, such a conundrum. I was almost thirty now and they still hadn't worked out the formula which would explain how between them they'd managed to create someone . . . well, creative.

'Far from it,' said Dad, stating the obvious. 'I'm not disturbing your work, am I?'

That was something else they didn't understand. My work. I had ditched their preferred university course, the one they had goaded me into applying for and gone to art college instead. After graduating, I had then embarked upon what they saw as a precarious and insecure career path as a children's book illustrator. Thank goodness I'd met and started dating Piers before leaving uni. Marrying him had made me less of a disappointment in their eyes, only now I didn't have Piers . . . or a marriage . . .

'No, no,' I quickly said, before my mind took a darker turn.

'I'm packing today, not working.'

Dad didn't miss a beat.

'You are putting everything into storage, Holly, aren't you?' he asked, sounding panicked. 'Because we really haven't got room for you and all of your . . .'

'Yes, Dad,' I cut in, thinking of the empty rooms in my childhood home and trying not to feel too affronted that there was no space in any of them for my few worldly goods. 'It'll just be me, a suitcase and a couple of bags and for the shortest time possible. You won't even know I'm there.'

'Right,' he said, sounding mollified as he let out a breath. 'That's great. Good.'

I knew neither of them wanted me moving back in. *I didn't want me moving back in.* Had I been able to find an alternative that wouldn't have meant rinsing through my divorce settlement money, money I was supposed to be using as a down payment if I could decide where I wanted to move to, then I would have grasped it with both hands. But I hadn't, so here we were. All set to face the most miserable Christmas we'd ever spent together and that was saying a lot.

'So why was Mum going to phone me then?' I asked, trying to get to the cause behind the call.

'Oh, well, we just wanted to double-check that you were definitely still coming, really.'

He did have the grace to sound at least a little shamefaced to be asking again. But that could have been more by accident than design.

'Yes, Dad,' I said, sounding every bit as miserable about it as he obviously was. 'I'm really sorry, but as I told you both just a few days ago, I'm definitely still coming.'

We said our slightly strained goodbyes and I resumed my staring into space, mulling over the events which had led me to this wretched point.

'*And you're sure you definitely don't want kids?*' I heard my voice from the past echo in my head.

'*I'm definitely sure I don't want kids,*' Piers answered with a smile in his tone and sounding completely certain.

That had been the question I had asked before I accepted his proposal of marriage. I wanted to be absolutely convinced of that before I said yes. I didn't want there to be any danger of him changing his mind a few years down the line because I knew I wouldn't.

I'd lost count of the number of times since then that I'd wondered what might have happened if his brother hadn't fathered twin boys and then a daughter. Would Piers have been happy with it being just him and me forever had his brother not subsequently been perched on the most fertile family member pedestal after doing his bit to increase the world's population?

I don't suppose it mattered now because it wasn't just me and Piers anymore. When I hadn't succumbed to the pressure to change my mind about making babies and starting to think about the viability of my dwindling eggs, which was aimed at me from both his family and mine, it had soon become Piers and Tamara. And then, swiftly after our separation, Piers and Tamara and

their bump. I'd been ruthlessly cast aside by his previously doting mum and dad, my brother-in-law and his wife after the happy announcement and of course, I'd further disappointed my own parents into the bargain.

'Poor me,' I huffed as I felt the sharp sting of abandonment again, then reached for the jumper I'd previously pulled off because packing boxes had been warm work.

The house felt cold now, but then it was the end of October. I'd left the heating off to economise as it was just me living there and paying the final bills. Piers and Tamara were cosily installed in a family friendly out of town newbuild awaiting the arrival of their precious firstborn and I was only staying in the house a few more days, until it was time to hand in the keys to the estate agent who would then pass them on to the ecstatic newlyweds who were moving in. I hoped they'd be happier here than I'd been.

I wondered if it was too early to open a bottle of wine, and was poised to fully wallow in a few hours of indulgent self-pity when my phone started to ring again.

'Hello,' I answered, not bothering to check the caller ID.

'Hey, Holly,' came the enthusiastic response. 'You've answered at last! How's tricks, my darling girl?'

I leant back against the sofa again. I wasn't someone who had a wide circle of friends but I was grateful that there were two stalwarts in my life who I could rely on. For me, friendships had always been about quality over quantity. Not that I really deserved the quality or the devotion this pair offered, because recently I'd been rubbish at keeping in touch with them. The unanswered messages stacked up on my phone were proof enough of that.

'Neil.' I smiled, turning my gaze away from the packing carnage which was currently threatening to swallow me whole. 'I'm great. Very nearly out of here now and eager to—'

'I'm assuming you've found somewhere to go then?' he cut in.

'Even if you haven't messaged us a forwarding address or talked to either of us in weeks.'

I'd been introduced to Neil by Piers soon after we'd got together during Freshers week at university and Neil, and later his husband, Mark, had become close friends who had properly stuck. Friends I felt terrible for not keeping in the loop because they'd faithfully been Team Holly during the last year and a half.

'Sort of,' I gloomily said. 'All of my stuff is going into storage at the end of the week . . .'

'And you're heading where, exactly, after that?' Neil interrogated, his voice full of concern that tugged at my heartstrings.

'I'm going to my parents,' I said, biting my lip. He burst out laughing, his concern momentarily forgotten.

'No, I am,' I told him. 'Just until I . . .'

'But you can't,' he screeched, when he realised I wasn't joking. 'You know you can't. You'll drive each other mad.'

'All I know,' I said, 'is that I haven't got any other choice. Not unless I want to start eating into my savings and I really can't afford to do that. At least I can stay with Mum and Dad rent-free.' I took a moment to consider that. 'At least, I'm assuming I can stay there rent free. We haven't actually spoken about it . . .'

'Is this why you've not been in touch?' Neil asked. 'Because you couldn't bear to tell us you were moving home?'

'No,' I said, 'it's not that. Well, not just that.'

'What else then?'

'Oh,' I said, trying to sound jolly and failing. 'I've just been so busy, you know. Work's been flat out and I've still got all this packing to do. I haven't been talking to anyone, really.'

Not that there was anyone else for me to talk to and I hadn't been working flat out either. But I couldn't think about that right now. If I added that to the equation, then it really would be wine o'clock.

'Well,' said Neil, sounding soothed. 'That's some consolation, I suppose, and it's just as well you picked up when you did,' he added, sounding smug.

'Is it?'

'It is,' he confirmed. 'Because I'm about to save your bacon.'

'You are?'

'For the next couple of months, anyway.'

'How so?'

'By inviting you to stay here and in the process save you from your ghastly parents,' he proclaimed, with a shudder.

'You mean you're inviting me to stay in your house?'

'Yes,' he said. 'In our house. You know, the one in Nightingale Square that you haven't visited for ages.'

It was a beautiful house, located in a stunning part of Norwich, but it would be a squeeze for three adults for longer than a few days and to be honest, I wasn't sure I could cope with Neil

watching my every move or Mark trying to set me up with the single, straight men he seemed to have a knack for spotting when they came to buy pastries from the bakery he worked in.

'But—'

'But nothing,' Neil carried on. 'Before you say no, let me tell you that I'm not only asking you to come here out of the goodness of my heart, I'm asking you because we *need* you to come.'

'You *need* me to come?' I frowned.

'Desperately,' he insisted. 'And you won't have to worry about overcrowding, because Mark and I won't be here. Not for a couple of months, anyway.'

'Oh.' I frowned. That put rather a different complexion on the situation. 'Why? Where are you going?'

'I've designed a house for a client on the outskirts of Barcelona,' Neil, who like Piers was an architect, explained, 'and I'm heading out there, all expenses paid, ahead of the build to iron out a few wrinkles and Mark is coming with me. We're going traveling for a bit after, so our place is going to be empty between this weekend and right into the new year.'

'Oh, wow,' I gasped, dreaming of their winter, or part of it at least, spent in sunny Spain. 'How exciting is that?'

I was quite envious of their plan, especially as Christmas was creeping ever closer. The last one had been hellish but it was going to be even worse this year, stuck with Mum and Dad. Since I'd left home, I'd turned into a big fan of the winter celebration and didn't want it to be tainted forever, even if I wasn't quite in the mood for feasting and fairy lights just yet. The gauge on my festive feeling barometer was still firmly fixed on gloomy, but I wouldn't let it be stuck there for the rest of time.

'It is,' Neil carried on, sounding less buoyant. 'Or at least it was.'

'Why, what's happened?'

'Well, we hadn't planned on leaving the house empty,' he sighed. 'We'd booked a sitter, but she's had to pull out at the last minute on account of her mother having had a fall and we can't get anyone else at such short notice.'

'Oh,' I said, 'I see.'

'So, Mark's now saying he should stay behind.'

Neil sounded so disappointed. I closed my eyes for a moment and thought it through. I'd always enjoyed the many trips Piers and I had made to Nightingale Square in the past. There was a strong sense of community surrounding the place, which tightly bound together the neighbours, who lived in houses around a communal green.

They all looked out for each other, and it seemed like an idyllic way to live in a city, but that in itself could be an issue. If I took up Neil's offer, was I going to want the neighbours potentially watching out for me at a time when I would much rather keep my head down and waffle along unnoticed? If I ran into them, they were bound to question where Piers was, given that we'd spent some time with a few of them during previous visits and I wasn't sure I had the stamina yet to dole out endless explanations. At least with my parents the questions had all been asked and addressed.

And then of course there was the community garden, The Grow-Well, which was situated across the road from the square in the grounds of the magnificent mansion house, Prosperous Place. Everyone got stuck in there, but I barely knew the difference between a dahlia and a dandelion. I'd be more of a hindrance than a help. A horticultural liability.

'So, what do you reckon?' Neil asked, his tone full of hope.

'Can I think about it for a bit?' I hedged.

'Seriously?' he gasped. 'You really need to consider if what we're offering trumps moving back into the box room at your parents' place?'

'Just a day or so,' I said, knowing it was madness not to immediately snatch his hand off, but feeling cautious nonetheless.

'There really is no time to dither,' said Neil, sounding flummoxed.

'But the Grow-Well ...' I pointed out.

'Is all tucked up for the winter,' he immediately countered. 'You won't have to do a thing there. This is literally a "sit in the house and keep the heating on so the pipes don't freeze" kind of commitment. I daresay you won't see a soul.'

His desperation was palpable and, to be honest, given the alternative, it was a Christmas gift come early, especially if I really did end up not seeing a soul. I'd just have to keep my head down and fly under the radar. And the act of kindness my stay would be for them would go some way to making up for the fact that I hadn't kept in touch when they'd both been so determined to keep looking out for me.

'Go on then,' I therefore agreed. 'I'll ditch the parents and come, but on one condition.'

'What's that?'

'Mark has to lay in a decent stock of cake.'

'He'll be delighted to,' Neil confirmed, still laughing. 'We leave on Friday afternoon. Can you be here for then?'

'I have to drop the keys for this place with the agent that morning,' I explained, 'so I can be with you by lunchtime.' My worries about the neighbourly neighbours aside, I knew it was

going to be a real luxury to have the peace and solitude in which to consider my next steps and my new life. And I could quietly celebrate the season, too, should I feel inclined.

I would use my time alone in the square to properly decide where I wanted to move to next, a decision I had found impossible to make while still living in my former marital home and I'd get my work head in gear, too. And reconcile myself to my marriage ending. I knew it was a lot to cram in, but suddenly, freed from the prospect of seeing out the year with my parents, anything felt possible!

'You're a doll!' Neil cheered. 'We'll see you then!'

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