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## About the Book

### **‘What’s the three day rule?’**

**Well, you know the saying: families are like fish. They go off after three days.’**

When the Thorne family gather for the annual Christmas festivities – the arguments, jealousies and long-held enmities that make every family Christmas so special – they think they’ve only got to endure each other for three days, and then they can return to normality.

But then the snows come, along with the ninety-mile-an-hour winds and the plunging temperatures, and the Thornes get cut off with only each other for support, or to blame. It promises to be a Christmas like no other . . .

## About the Authors

Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees each had novels of their own published before teaming up to write bestsellers together. Their work has been translated into twenty-six languages. They are married and live in London with their three daughters.

*Also by Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees*

The Boy Next Door  
Come Again  
Come Together  
Love Lives  
The Seven Year Itch  
We Are Family

# The Three Day Rule

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees



arrow books

For our three godsons, Oliver, Jack and Paddy.  
(You can always spend Christmas with us!)

# **Acknowledgements**

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***DAY 1***

**Christmas Eve**

## ***Chapter 1***

Kellie Vaughan pulled back the thick drapes and shivered, tying the white hotel robe around her. From where she was standing in the bay window of the penthouse suite, she could see down over the grey slate roofs of the houses to the harbour where small fishing boats littered the shallow inlet. At the far end, beyond the quayside with its old stone harbour wall, the headland was covered in purple and yellow heather and, beyond that, the Channel – this morning a deep navy-blue – glistened beneath the powdery sky, where a high wisp of cloud hung like a question mark.

In the far distance, she thought she could just about make out the small island where Elliot would be spending Christmas with his family, but maybe it was wishful thinking on her part.

Kellie turned away and sighed, looking round at the neutral creams and beiges of the hotel room and at the upside-down champagne bottle in the ice bucket on the table next to the plush sofas. She was in Fleet Town, the capital of St John's, which was the largest island of the group off the south Cornish coast. The islands themselves had a reputation as a great holiday destination, but now, in the depths of winter, they seemed bleak and uninspiring. Even though she couldn't complain about the five-star luxury surrounding her, three days stretched ahead and, for most of that time, she'd be here on her own.

Perhaps it was something she should have considered when Elliot had first suggested her coming – but she hadn't. She'd done what she'd always done: made out that she was the fun, impulsive chancer she always was, happy to be

swept up in Elliot's romantic proposal, flying in a Sikorsky helicopter from Penzance and staying in the best, most exclusive spa hotel on the island. He'd made it sound so simple and plausible, but now she could see that she was going to have to fill hours of her time.

But surely it was a small price to pay? Every moment they could be together counted, even snatched ones. That was what being in love was all about.

Besides, she should be used to it by now. In the summer, when Elliot had been forced into spending a two-week holiday with his family in Italy, he'd ensured that Kellie was in the hotel in the next bay and he had taken up one-man sailing as a hobby so that he could be with her every afternoon.

Once again, here she was, on the same clandestine terms, but this time twenty-eight miles off the coast of Cornwall, and Kellie couldn't help fearing that Elliot's certainty that he'd be able to sneak away and spend at least one night and the majority of each day with her wasn't as realistic as he was making out. After all, his father's house was on Brayner, one of the smaller islands. Elliot had made it sound as if it was next door, but Kellie could see for herself that it was a lot further than that. Sneaking back and forth would require a boat, the same as in Italy, but even assuming Elliot got hold of one, could sloping off in the middle of a family Christmas really be as simple as he'd led her to believe?

Behind her Elliot stirred in the dishevelled bed.

'What are you doing over there?' he said, his voice husky with a hangover after all the brandy they'd drunk together in the hotel bar last night as well as the champagne back in the room. 'Come back.' He closed his eyes, smiled and slumped his head on the pillow, patting the Kellie-shaped dent on the bed beside him.

Kellie smiled and walked over, kneeling down and ruffling his hair. She loved him the most when he was like this, his hair all messed up from sleep, his sexy smell of sweat and

expensive aftershave. He squinted up at her through blue-grey eyes.

‘You’ve got too many clothes on,’ he said.

She laughed. ‘I thought you had a hangover.’

‘So cure me.’

‘But it’s nearly time,’ Kellie said, wriggling out of her robe and lying in his arms. She knew that his family were all expecting him to arrive on St John’s today, after a big work function in London last night. They had no idea that Elliot was already here.

‘I know. Oh, Christ, Kel. I’m so jealous of you being here. I wish I was having a break,’ he said, turning to her, ‘but I suppose you do deserve one.’

Kellie felt a flush of pleasure that he’d finally acknowledged how hard she’d been working. Elliot was the most driven man she’d met in her career and he pushed her hard in hers too – so much so, that lately it seemed as if she’d given up her whole life to WDG & Partners, the law firm where they both worked. The pressure had never seemed to stop. She’d been promoted at the beginning of the year, which had been hard enough, and then, when a reshuffle had happened a few months ago, she’d been promoted again. She knew that Elliot had been involved with the decision-making process, but that had only made her even more determined to prove herself on her own terms. When everyone at the office stopped speculating and found out after Christmas that she and Elliot were together, she didn’t want anyone accusing her of sleeping her way to the top.

She was glad, however, that he was jealous of her having a break. The more he imagined her to be having a wonderful time, chilling out, the harder he would try to get to be with her.

‘Yes . . . well you deserve one, too,’ she said.

Elliot groaned. ‘I just can’t bear it,’ he said, scrunching up his face so that he looked like a little boy. ‘I don’t want to

go.'

Kellie was used to this. Elliot was far worse than her every time they had to part. She knew he felt guilty about spending time with his family, away from her, and, ironic though this was, more often than not she was the one who ended up being strong about it. It was almost as if there were two Elliots: the one at work who was powerful, masterly and strong, and this Elliot, the one she loved the most, but also the one who made it almost impossible to believe he had a child of his own.

Usually, Kellie laughed at him, but now, as she lay her chin on his chest and walked her fingertips through the thick ruffle of dark hair between his nipples, her usual composure was replaced by suffocating jealousy.

'Then don't go. Stay here with me. Don't go at all,' she said. 'We can stay in bed for days and live off room service. No one would ever know . . .'

'I'd love to, believe me,' he said, stretching.

'But you can't,' she said, finishing his sentence for him. Or won't, she wanted to add, but stopped herself.

'Hey, look on the bright side,' he said, gently. 'I was supposed to be going for a whole week, but I absolutely refused. The three day rule must be obeyed.'

'What's that?'

'You know, the saying . . . families are like fish. Three days and they go off.'

'If it's going to be so terrible, why don't you just bin it? Think about it. This could be the perfect opportunity. Call Isabelle. Tell her it's over.'

Elliot sighed. 'Bloody hell, it's tempting, believe me, but we've been through this. There's Taylor . . . and my father . . . it's Christmas . . .'

There it was again: Christmas. Kellie knew it was fatal to sound as if she was whining, or harassing him (she knew these were the most loathed traits of Elliot's daughter and wife), but she didn't understand this big deal about

Christmas. She wasn't religious and Elliot wasn't either. Sure, she liked to celebrate it along with everyone else, but that whole family togetherness thing was so archaic. Her own family would never dream of deeming Christmas enough of a reason to get together. Her brother was on a ship somewhere off Canada, her mother lived and worked in Paris, and her father had remarried back home in Australia a few years ago and had another family to worry about now.

'Christmas. Christmas. I hate bloody Christmas,' she said, rolling away from him and folding her arms. She thought about the iPod play list she'd put together entitled Shite Christmas which included Big Boss Man's 'Christmas Boogaloo', Grandaddy's 'Alan Parsons in a Winter Wonderland' and, Kellie's personal favourite, Robin Laing's 'The Man Who Slits the Turkeys' Throats at Christmas'. She was going to have a long bath and play it as soon as Elliot had gone.

'Bah humbug,' Elliot said.

'I do. It's such bollocks. We just get suckered in to all this consumerism and nobody really gives a shit. The only people who benefit are the shops. It's like being hit by a tsunami of tackiness. I went to Oxford Street last week and it was hell on a stick.'

Elliot laughed.

'And Christmas cards?' she continued on her rant. 'What's all *that* about? It's such a waste of trees. Half the time people don't even sign them. Oh, and those round robin letters -' She paused, a thought occurring to her. She turned over, leaning on her elbows, and looked at Elliot. 'Does Isabelle send one? I bet she does.'

Elliot groaned and covered his face.

'Ha! I knew it. Tell me all about it. Go on. Is it -'

'Excruciating? Yes, it is,' Elliot said, cutting her off, as he looked through the gaps between his fingers. He clearly wasn't going to relent and give her all the details, but she knew this already. Elliot was a diplomat and he only liked

bitching about Isabelle on his own terms (usually when he was drunk) but not like this, not when Kellie tried to instigate conversations that would force him to say unkind things. 'Fortunately for me,' he continued, pressing the end of Kellie's nose and smiling, 'I have you to get me out of all that stuff. Thank God.'

'You could just get out of it now, if you wanted to . . .'

'Oh darling. Please don't make this harder than it already is. I have to do what's right, and I have to do this. Just this one time, OK?'

'But you are still going to tell them in the new year like you promised?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'*By* New Year?' she specified.

'I've told you: I'm going to fix it.'

She knew it was pointless pressing him any further. She had to trust him. She did. She loved him. He'd broken down a few months ago and told her that he'd fallen in love with her and that she'd shown him that all that he had in his life meant nothing without her. Since then, their future together had become certain.

'It's going to be far worse for me,' he said, smoothing a strand of her long wavy brown hair away from her face. 'How do you think I'm going to feel, knowing you're here? I need to be able to think about where you are every second. What are you going to do when I go?'

Now that he'd asked her such an obvious question, it occurred to Kellie that she'd given it almost no thought. She supposed she could amuse herself. She'd take spa treatments and indulge herself with some quality time doing nothing. Suddenly she felt less brave at the prospect.

'I bet you'll be in heaven with all those movies to watch without me to interrupt,' he said.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that she'd already checked out the hotel room's DVD collection and had seen every one, just the same as she'd seen nearly every film in

her local video store. She'd inadvertently turned into an amateur movie buff – an unexpected benefit of all those late nights she'd spent on her own, waiting for Elliot to call.

'I suppose . . . or I can explore a bit. Catch up on some sleep . . . read . . .'

She rubbed her eyes, last night's mascara crunching beneath the heel of her hand. 'Take off my make-up,' she continued, showing the black smudge to Elliot. 'Attractive, huh?'

'Very. You're beautiful, Kel. Even when you're impersonating a panda. Now, how about you bring that perfect, sexy body of yours over here?' he said, pulling her on top of him.

Then slowly, sensuously, they began to make love.

Kellie had never intended to become Elliot's mistress, but a year into their relationship, the facts were simple: Elliot made her happy and she made him happy too. Happier than he'd ever been in his life, so he said, and she believed him. Despite their ten-year age difference, they had a sexual connection and an emotional compatibility that they both talked about as being fated – and even though being a mistress came with its harder moments, there wasn't even a glimmer of suspicion in her mind that Elliot was 'fucking his cake and eating it', as Jane, her oldest but now extremely distant friend, had so bluntly summed it up. Kellie was impervious to such accusations. The reality was Elliot had been unhappy for years, long before he'd met Kellie.

In fact, his reputation as a miserable ogre had somewhat preceded him when she'd started working on her first corporate law case with him at WDG & Partners. Apparently, Elliot Thorne was the big, ferocious, uncompromising boss, reportedly so demanding that he'd made plenty of other minions in Kellie's position cry. But Kellie had taken a different approach, answering him back and making him apologise for being rude. She'd fought fire with fire, and playing Elliot at his own game had seemed to do the trick.



Within days she'd made him laugh. Within weeks they'd become friends.

It wasn't long before he'd tentatively opened up to her and she'd discovered that he was just about the loneliest man she'd ever met. Soon Kellie knew all about his control freak, business-obsessed wife, Isabelle, and his surly, withdrawn daughter, Taylor. Kellie knew she shouldn't get involved, but she'd found herself wanting to make Elliot's life a better place.

Then, last Christmas, they'd spent every night in the run-up to Christmas working on a case until the small hours. When they'd finally said goodbye, Kellie had fought back tears of an altogether different sort to those of her predecessors. She'd known that she was going to miss him, and it wasn't the kind of missing that was healthy to feel about one's boss.

Which is why, when a soaking wet, distraught-looking Elliot had run up the road after her and had flattened her against the railings, apologising and kissing her in quick succession, she'd known that she wasn't the only one in the grip of something bigger than she'd ever experienced.

They'd barely spent more than a day apart since, and when Elliot had rented the flat up the road from the Chancery Lane office, it had seemed like the most natural and convenient thing in the world for Kellie to move in. He might have been keeping her a secret from his family until the time was right, and it certainly wasn't right to let anyone at work know, but Elliot's commitment to her never wavered.

And now, afterwards, as she lay in his arms, silently stroking his smooth skin, she felt more in love with him than ever. Eventually, Elliot stretched before getting up and heading into the en-suite bathroom.

Kellie admired the view of his naked backside, as he looked at himself in the mirror.

‘So what’s this Brayner island like, then?’ she asked, getting out of bed.

‘It’s a nice place to come in the summer, but why Dad has moved here permanently is a mystery. No one expected him to retire here full time.’

‘I quite like the idea of retiring to a small island,’ Kellie said, joining him in the bathroom. ‘It’s romantic.’

‘And totally impractical, but he’s so stubborn there was no telling him.’

‘I’d like to see it one day. It’s beautiful, right?’

‘If you like that kind of thing, but to be honest, at this time of year it’s just barren and bleak and windswept, and there’s absolutely nothing to do. For city people like us, it’s just . . . I don’t know . . . you’d find it much too low level. Boring.’

Kellie put her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his back, as he started to brush his teeth. She didn’t want to argue with him. He always seemed to forget that she’d grown up in Australia and was used to wilderness. It didn’t matter. She liked him referring to them as an ‘us’.

‘You never talk about your family much, apart from what happened to Stephanie. How is she?’ Kellie felt for Elliot’s elder sister. She wished she could reach out to her, but she knew that even thinking this was overstepping the boundaries of her current relationship with Elliot. It was so frustrating to be so central to his life in some ways and entirely excluded in others.

‘Coping, I guess. I suppose that’s one good thing about Christmas at Dad’s. It’ll take her mind off things. It might cheer her up a bit.’

‘You can cheer her up, I’m sure.’ Kellie let go of him and looked at him in the mirror, trying to memorise the details of his face, knowing that very soon she’d once again be aching to see him. ‘What about her husband? How’s he?’

Elliot sighed and turned to her. ‘Do we have to talk about them? It’s bad enough that I’ve got to see them all in a little while.’

She picked up her toothbrush, noticing that the contents of her washbag were strewn all over the side, whilst Elliot's were neatly stashed in his leather bag, which he now zipped closed. Why didn't he understand that of course she wanted to talk about them? After all, one day they'd be her family too. But she knew it was still too soon to discuss that particular issue.

'Darling,' Elliot said, looking at her in the mirror. 'They're just family. It's not important.'

'Isn't it?' Suddenly, she felt like crying.

'Don't be like that. Don't you know I'm going to miss you every second?'

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Perhaps she was being unfair, she thought, as she felt him sigh into her hair. Perhaps it really was going to be worse for him.

'At least there's Taylor,' she said, as he rubbed her back. She pulled away and looked up at him, trying to be brave.

'I know. I just hope it's not too late to get through to her before she grows up completely. She's changed so much since she's been away at school. She'll probably go out of her mind without Sky Plus on Brayner, but at least it'll mean I get to spend some time with her.'

Kellie wondered what Taylor looked like. Elliot hadn't shown Kellie a recent picture of his daughter, but she'd memorised the details of the cute little toddler framed in silver on Elliot's desk. She tried to transpose those baby features on to a young girl. She imagined Taylor in braids and braces shyly staring through an overgrown fringe.

'You've just got to be kind to her – and don't patronise her. Don't come over the big lawyer. She'll have to let you in eventually,' she said.

'I hope so, I really do. I need to make things right with her. I need her to know that when things change in the new year she'll still be a part of my life. That she always will be.'

'She'll know that. We'll make her see. I promise.'

We . . . she'd said it without even thinking about it. And he hadn't even flinched. We . . . that's what they were: Kel and El. A team.

Elliot hugged her again. She was glad that he trusted her intuition about his daughter. She was looking forward to meeting Taylor and nervous too. Kellie was under no illusion that it might be hard for Taylor to come to terms with her father being with a new partner. She could still remember how angry she'd been at her own parents for splitting up – and she'd been nearly out of school, five years older than Taylor was now. Nevertheless, Kellie hoped she could provide some of the stability and attention that seemed to be missing from Taylor's life. The girl was only a young teenager. Perhaps they might even be friends, once Taylor could see for herself how much Kellie loved her father. For a moment, Kellie spun off into a mini fantasy, picturing herself and Taylor laughing and linking arms as they walked down the King's Road, laden with shopping bags.

'Hey, I've got something for you,' Elliot whispered.

Kellie glanced down between them and felt him press against her. 'Again?'

She laughed as he lifted her up and carried her back towards the bed.

'But don't you have to meet your sister –'

'You're more important,' he silenced her with a kiss, 'and I've got something else for you too,' he said, as he put her on the bed. She watched him scramble across the room and reach into the pocket of his coat.

She looked up at Elliot, wide-eyed as he returned. He grinned back as she took the small Tiffany box from his hand.

'Go on,' he said.

Inside was a beautiful twisted platinum chain, with a heart-shaped diamond pendant on it. It looked incredibly expensive and it couldn't have been more perfect if she'd chosen it herself.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, unsure of what it meant.

‘I want you to think of it as an anniversary present, just in case you thought I’d forgotten,’ he said.

She flung her arms around his neck. ‘I love it.’

‘And I love you, baby,’ he whispered, ‘and I promise you, we’ll be together every Christmas after this.’

## ***Chapter 2***

It seemed to have got much colder, as the boat finally reached Brayner and moored next to the barnacle-covered jetty in Green Bay harbour. Stephanie could hardly wait to get off. She realised that for most of the twenty-five-minute journey from Fleet Town, she'd been holding her breath. She truly hated being on the water, especially in a boat with all her family on board. She took a deep breath now to steady her nerves. The air was so fresh and cold it hurt the inside of her nose.

She shaded her eyes and looked up at the typical postcard shot of Green Bay village, which consisted of around forty houses and cottages, a tea shop, the Windcheater public house, the post office and a youth hostel, which was open in the summer. The only other buildings of significance were the lighthouse behind her, the old school house, with its corrugated iron roof adorned with Christmas lights, and the pretty Norman church. The tourist board couldn't have designed it any better if they'd tried, but for Stephanie, arriving in Green Bay was always tinged with a certain disappointment. It never matched the rather romantic sun-drenched image she held of it in her memory, especially on a day like today.

'Be careful!' Stephanie called, as her son Simon barged past her to be first out of the boat. In a second he was off, running up the steep, cobbled slipway towards the road, where a Santa decoration flapped in the breeze on the iron lamppost.

She could tell, as she watched him ignore her warning and spread out his arms to zoom away, that he was thrilled to be

back on the island. Like his grandfather, Simon found the sheer expanse of sky a taste of freedom. It was certainly a different world from the one he was used to in their traffic-clogged, graffiti-adorned suburb of Bristol.

But at least in Bristol, Simon could be contained. She felt her heart lurch as he reached the road.

‘David, can you just leave Nat and watch him,’ she said, irritated that her husband was unsteadily lifting up Nat, their five-year-old daughter, as well as two of the bags and the rucksack, out of the boat. ‘Just give her to me,’ she snapped. ‘Come to Mummy,’ she said, holding out her arms.

‘Simon’s fine, OK? Let him go,’ David said, as Stephanie took Nat from him.

David was tall and still as slim as he was when Stephanie married him ten years ago, but he looked bulky in the black North Face puffer jacket. His cheeks were pink from the cold boat ride and his face was creased with laughter lines, but he looked deadly serious as his brown eyes now flashed a warning at her.

Stephanie ignored it. She knew he didn’t want her to draw attention publicly to Simon, but that was because David refused to recognise that there was a problem.

The truth was that Simon *was* a problem. Or rather, he wasn’t. He was perfect; he was her son – but he *did* need watching. He *did* need more attention than other eight-year-olds. He just had so much energy, so many thoughts, that sometimes he had difficulty channelling them all productively. That’s what the child psychiatrist had told Stephanie. He’d outlined a plan for her and David to help Simon focus more on what was going on around him, and to take each thought at a time and work it through. It infuriated her that David didn’t take this as seriously as she did. He was distrustful of psychiatrists. He didn’t think Simon needed one. He thought that if they all stuck their heads in the sand, then the problem would simply go away.

David brushed roughly past her with the bags, as he climbed out of the boat.

‘Does Uncle Elliot have any more treats?’ Nat whispered to Stephanie, giggling conspiratorially. The fake fur trim on her pink suede coat tickled Stephanie’s face and she put her hand out to flatten it down. As she did, she could see that Nat’s tongue was blue with food dye.

Elliot had been slipping both children handfuls of M&Ms the whole way over behind Stephanie’s back, as they’d bumped through the spray. She’d wanted to stop him, but she also knew how pleased the kids were to see their favourite uncle.

‘I thought you were feeling seasick?’ Stephanie said.

‘I’m not now, Mummy. Please,’ Nat begged.

‘No. You’ve had enough.’

Stephanie unloaded the rest of the bags, before helping Nat off the boat. She felt relieved when they were safely on dry land. She turned back and looked at Elliot, who was still talking to the guy in the boat who’d brought them over from St John’s.

Her brother, oblivious to all the stress she felt, seemed happy and relaxed. He looked surprisingly well, Stephanie noticed, feeling envious and affectionate, at the same time. But then, Elliot had always had a charmed life. Still, she was so relieved he’d met up with them all in Fleet Town. Without him to lift their spirits, Stephanie would almost certainly have lost her temper with David.

‘And you can come and take us back whenever we want? I just give you a call?’ Elliot checked with the ferryman. She watched Elliot reach under his buttoned up navy coat into the back pocket of his jeans, bringing out a silver money clip and peeling off a note.

‘Just get on the radiotelephone if you need me,’ the man said. He stood patiently on the boat, as the waves slapped against the slipway. ‘Just ask for Ben. That’s me. Your father will have the number.’



‘Come on,’ Stephanie said to Elliot. ‘It’s freezing.’

He handed over some cash and stepped reluctantly on to the slipway with his expensive-looking leather Gladstone bag. Ben unhooked the rope, and revved the motor, obviously anxious to get going. A cloud of blue smoke sped across the water.

Stephanie rolled her eyes at her brother before grabbing his arm. ‘It’s not going to be that bad,’ she said, before calling out to Ben, ‘Don’t worry. He won’t need to escape, I promise. Thanks for the lift. Happy Christmas.’

Ben waved and the boat turned away.

Ahead of them, Stephanie heard the beep of a car. Her father was pulling up on the small road in front of the cottages in his dark green Land-Rover. He stepped out and waved. Stephanie felt her heart lift as she waved back, undergoing the familiar cocktail of emotions she always went through when she arrived to see him: nostalgic homecoming mixed with anxiety and that slightly shaken feeling, as if she’d wrong-footed herself in a no-man’s-land between her adult life and her childhood self.

From down here, he looked older, his white hair blowing upright in the wind, but he was alive and smiling and that was all that mattered. He opened the double door at the back of the Land-Rover and Rufus, the last remaining offspring of Samson, Elliot’s childhood Springer, leapt out and started racing around in circles of excitement. Stephanie watched her father being almost bowled over by Simon, who became swiftly enveloped in her father’s green padded jacket. Then, before Stephanie could protest, Nat was running towards Stephanie’s father, too.

She watched Nat go, listening to her shriek of delight. She could see in her children’s faces how much they needed a holiday, how desperately they needed a break from her. It made her so sad; she felt the urge to grab them back and hug them both. Their dysfunctional and yet familiar family dynamic was about to be diluted into the greater whole of

the Thorne clan. How would she cope, left alone with David without the protection of her children, who were bound to get sucked into the vortex of the Christmas jamboree?

Christmas. She'd been dreading it for so long and now it was finally here, but seeing her father and hearing his laughter borne up on the breeze made her realise that she *had* to make an effort. She didn't have to let the old family hierarchy slot back into place. Living under her father's roof, by his and Elliot's rules – whose turn it was to lay the table, who was best at being in charge of asking the Trivial Pursuit questions, who got to walk the dog in the morning and who decided what to watch on the box – she didn't have to let *any* of this slowly drive her nuts. And she *wouldn't*. She'd float through it all serenely, like a perfect, private cloud. She'd resist the temptation to revert to type and start acting like the argumentative teenager she'd once been. She wouldn't squabble with Elliot about his cigars, or leaving the newspaper on the floor in the downstairs loo, she'd rise above it all. They all could. They could all act like adults. Just for three days. Could it really be that hard?

'Here, let me help,' Elliot said, as Stephanie loaded up with all the carrier bags by her feet.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I don't know how we've managed to bring so much junk for three days.'

She glanced up at him. He had a mole high up on his cheekbone, a genetic legacy from their mother's side of the family which Simon had inherited, too. It had been the mark of her mother's beauty and now, in his prime, the small blemish made Elliot more handsome than ever. She noticed the wrinkles around his eyes and the flecks of grey in his hair, but she could still see the boy inside him, the boy who had broken the hearts of all her friends, even though they'd been older than him.

'You OK, Steph?' he asked. He had a way of engaging anyone he spoke to with full eye contact, almost as if he wanted to look right inside them. It was a clever trick for

getting people to like him – and to tell the truth. So, for a second, she was tempted to tell him how she felt. She wondered whether her perfect brother with his perfect career and perfect family would ever begin to understand how difficult the prospect of this Christmas was for her, but she'd never burdened him with her problems and now was not the time to start.

She nodded and smiled quickly.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's not keep Dad waiting.'

At the top of the slipway, Gerald reached out and plucked a piece of loose cotton from Stephanie's coat, before hugging her. The gesture reminded her of school photo days, long long ago, and suddenly all his little foibles came flooding back.

'I'm so glad you've made it,' he said, kissing her on the side of her head, next to her ear, as he always did.

It had been three months since she'd last seen her father, when he'd gone to London to a concert and had stayed with Elliot and Isabelle. Stephanie had driven up from Bristol the next day and they'd all gone out for Sunday lunch in some grim Fulham gastro pub near Elliot's house, where her father had grumbled about the over-familiar service and the quality of the steak.

He seemed so much more relaxed on his home turf and he looked hearty and well. As he hugged her, Stephanie breathed in his scent – a comforting concoction of musty jumpers, dog hair and the aftershave he'd used for years. As usual, the strength of the embrace took her by surprise, leaving her feeling vulnerable and childlike, as if all her achievements, her own family, her position in the surgery, her abilities as an adult, had been suddenly erased.

'Hello, Daddy,' she said.

They all squeezed into the cramped Land-Rover, Rufus protesting loudly from behind the bars in the boot as Stephanie corralled Simon on to her lap, losing her argument about seatbelts, when her father reminded her

there weren't any. David sat in the back next to her with Nat on his lap, tickling her so that she kept jerking about, as they bumped along the road.

Elliot sat in the front next to her father. Now she had a chance to observe them like this together, Stephanie remembered how similar they were in their mannerisms, how their heads seemed to tilt towards each other and how naturally a smile came to her father's lips when Elliot spoke. She fought down her childish jealousy at being left out of their friendship.

As they chatted and Nat squealed with laughter, Stephanie stared out of the mud-splattered window as they drove north, past the churchyard, which was strewn with forgotten gravestones tilting left and right like a flotilla of dinghies flexing their sails before the wind. She remembered walking round there at the end of the summer holidays, the last time she'd been here. The salt air had left the stones' inscriptions as illegible as smudged pencil marks. Rumour was that some of the graves were of sailors whose ships had been dashed into matchsticks on the other side of the island, on the treacherously rocky shores of Hell Bay.

She thought of her mother's neat memorial, unremarkable in a row of square-cut polished granite stones at the crematorium in Exeter. She wondered whether she'd ever visit it again. Even now, three years after the sudden, unexpected stroke had killed Emma Thorne in the garden of their old family home, Stephanie missed her dreadfully. Her absence seemed more profound than ever now that they were all together. Stephanie was determined that her mother would be remembered on Christmas Day.

'Is there going to be a service in the church this year, Dad?' she asked her father.

Gerald looked at her in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were still a clear blue-grey beneath white bushy eyebrows.

‘There was talk of the vicar coming over from Fleet Town on Christmas morning, but I don’t think there’s enough interest.’ He turned his attention back to the road. ‘She’s a woman you know. I don’t hear great things about her.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘She’s a bit stuffy. Puts people’s backs up.’

‘No chance of you running off with her then?’ Elliot teased.

‘Er, no,’ her father replied, adding to Elliot, ‘not with that moustache.’

Elliot guffawed. How could he even joke about their father being with another woman? Stephanie wondered. But her father didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, the good-humoured banter continued, as the car continued further north, past the row of cutesy cottages which tailed out of the village.

Suddenly, beyond the twee, low-walled cottage gardens, the land became rocky and boulder-strewn, rank with heather and gorse, suitable for sheep farming and not much else. The road snaked ahead of them, up and around the mighty domed shape of Solace Hill that protruded from the centre of the island, ‘like a great fat tit’ as Elliot had always loved to say. A couple of horses were at the top. They stared down impassively at the Land-Rover as it drove past.

Then came the row of stone houses, facing the sea, incongruous in their isolation.

‘All empty again,’ her father commented, as if it were some kind of mistake.

Stephanie knew that inside they were all done up for rent, with Welsh quilts on their beds and decorated with tourist-friendly brass fixtures and sepia photographs. Weekends and summertime, lights glowed in their windows at night and smoke curled up from their chimneys into the sky, but now, at Christmas time the windows were dark.

‘Don’t sound so surprised, Dad,’ Elliot said, laughing. ‘Who would be mad enough to come here at this time of year?’

‘You lot, for starters,’ her father replied. ‘I think it’s wonderful in the winter. A real adventure. Perfect for the kids.’

In spite of his optimism, Stephanie felt herself shiver with a sense of foreboding. Instinctively, she held Simon a little tighter.

‘Ow,’ he said, ‘Mum, let go. You’re hurting me.’

As they pulled up at her father’s house, five minutes later, Stephanie could see Isabelle putting the finishing touches to a Christmas wreath on the knocker of the white wooden front door. She had arrived yesterday and must have brought the wreath with her, Stephanie concluded, knowing that her father wasn’t big on Christmas and that there was no way such an unpractical item could have been purchased in any of the island’s limited stores. Then another thought occurred to her: Isabelle had probably made the wreath herself. Perhaps she majored in arts and crafts, the same as she seemed to in everything else she turned her hand to.

Isabelle turned and waved, flashing them an orthodontically perfect, professionally whitened American smile. As the kids waved back, Stephanie could see that her sister-in-law was looking as groomed as ever, her blonde hair perfectly sculpted to fall behind her ears. Today, she was wearing a pink cashmere jumper, a rabbit fur gilet which ruffled in the wind like the poor thing was still alive, and designer jeans tucked into furry boots. She stamped her feet, excitedly, waiting for everyone to join her at the front door, waving and shrieking with delight as Simon and Nat piled out of the car and ran over to hug her.

Inside, after all the hellos, Stephanie noticed that the house felt different. It was warm and the soft tones of unobtrusive hotel-lobby-style jazz played in the background, rather than the usual dull rumble of Radio Four. It smelt different, too: of cinnamon and baking and furniture polish, rather than fishing tackle and sandy wellies.