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Separate Beds

Written by Elizabeth Buchan

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Every marriage hides a secret

Separate Beds



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Separate Beds
by
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Chapter One

Zosia said to Annie, 'I'm glad you got home before I left.'

Annie dumped a whole lot of Christmas shopping on the table and ran her fingers through her hair. Bad-hair day. Very bad-hair day. 'So am I. Are you in a hurry? Would you like a glass of wine?'

There were just the two of them in the kitchen and the house was quiet and dark. Zosia always turned the lights off as she worked through the rooms. When Annie commented on this thrift, she had replied, 'We must not waste,' for the deprivations of Zosia's upbringing were lodged deep in her.

Annie retrieved a half-drunk bottle of excellent claret left over from the previous evening and gave her a glass.

Zosia took a mouthful and leaned back in the chair. 'Very nice, Annie.'

'Here, look . . .' Annie burrowed in a bag and shook out an expensive man's sweater. 'That's for Tom. Unimaginative, I know, but I haven't a clue what he wants these days. And here . . .' She produced a leather notebook. 'That's for Emily. I've still got to get Jake and Jocasta's. But look at these . . .' She waved a box of Christmas lights, plugged them in and, razzle-dazzle, hoop-la, a river of brilliance looped over the table.

'Beautiful, Annie.' Zosia closed her eyes. 'You always make everything so.'

Warm, sparkling clean, filled with things that made life easy and convenient . . . the house that had everything.

Not really, thought Annie, and the old feelings tore at her chest. This place will never be beautiful while we are as we are.

Remember . . .

The front door opened and closed. ‘Mia . . .’ She uttered the name she had called so many times since her daughter had left. Her voice quivered with pain and anticipation. ‘Mia, is that you?’

‘It’s only me.’ It was Tom and he refused to meet Annie’s eye.

Mia had been gone for a couple of weeks and a silence had fallen over the family. Tom had promised to go up to Manchester to try to make contact at the university to which Mia had almost certainly returned as she had every intention of finishing her degree. But, by the look of him, he hadn’t done any such thing. ‘Sorry,’ he confessed. ‘Something came up at work.’

He was lying. What Tom should have said was: I didn’t want to go and look for Mia because I feel so awful/ashamed/angry . . . you could take your pick as to the explanation. Actually, if Annie knew anything about her husband all of them applied.

‘So, work came before your daughter.’ Annie plucked at a lock of her hair and the anguish turned to aggression. ‘As always, Tom.’

‘Don’t start.’ He shrugged.

At that moment, Annie hated him more than she had ever hated anyone. It was a new emotion and its intensity

was akin to love. She also hated herself because this would never have happened if she and Tom had been cleverer and clearer about their marriage. 'If you won't go, I'll go.'

'She won't see you, Annie.'

'How do you know?'

He looked at her oddly. 'You accuse me of not knowing my children. But I do know Mia. She won't see you . . .'

Tom had been right. That had been then and Mia still had not come home, or phoned. She had written just once.

She had been gone for almost five years.

Come home. Please . . .

Annie draped the lights artistically over her handbag and smiled at Zosia. 'I'm not telling you what I've got for you.'

Zosia pointed to the diamond ring on Annie's finger. 'Do you want me to clean it before I go?'

Her mother's ring (and her grandmother's before that): hugely valuable but, more than that, part of Annie and irreplaceable. Zosia enjoyed handling it and she loved to please Annie, who slid it off her finger. 'Go on, then.'

Zosia buffed away and Annie watched her affectionately. 'Did I ever tell you Emily stole it? She must have been six or seven. There was such a fuss and everyone was pulling out drawers and upending the rubbish. I was so angry when she owned up. Poor little girl was shaking. But Tom talked to her. Tom was – is – always so good with her, and Emily confessed between sobs she thought I was going to give the ring to Mia.'

Zosia slid it back across the table. 'But it's true you can only give it to one of them.'

Annie said, 'We couldn't help laughing at Emily, which

was unfair on her and made her cross. At the time it was funny.’ She stopped herself and Zosia laid a hand on hers. After a moment, Annie asked, ‘So, have you booked the ticket?’

‘Yes. I will be gone for Christmas and New Year, as you said I could.’

‘Good.’

Zosia raised her eyes to Annie. ‘You are very kind to pay for the ticket. I am grateful.’

The two women smiled at each other. They went way back – to the day Zosia had turned up on the doorstep in answer to Annie’s advert for a cleaner and someone to help with the school runs – and were friends. It was a friendship springing out of a mutual empathy and a willingness to listen. ‘Careful,’ Tom had warned. ‘You’re Zosia’s employer.’

‘It’s nothing,’ said Annie, as the phone rang. ‘I want you to know how much I owe you. We owe you. For one thing . . .’ Annie sounded a touch wry ‘. . . I love talking to you.’ She picked up the phone. ‘Tom?’ She listened. ‘Oh, OK. Fine. See you.’ She replaced the receiver.

She poured more wine for Zosia. ‘That was Tom. Not coming home till late. Last-minute dinner with someone from the Foreign Office.’ After a minute, she added, ‘It’s been ages since Tom and I had supper together.’ A moment of further reflection ‘It happens in the run-up to Christmas. That’s the World Service for you . . . all the media, I imagine.’

‘Of course,’ said Zosia.

They exchanged a look.

Annie knew what Zosia would have liked to say: ‘Tom spends more time than he should on his work and has done

for years.’ And it was true that, since Mia had stormed out, things had been bad, really bad. But not bad enough for them to fold entirely.

At seven o’clock, Zosia leaped to her feet and declared she must go. Annie knew she liked to be home in time to phone her mother in Warsaw. At the door, Annie kissed her cheek fondly and said, ‘See you next week.’

The door clicked shut and the house was still. If only, Annie thought. If only . . . *if only* . . . So many things. If Tom hadn’t taken Mia’s room, I could sit in there for a bit and think about her. But Tom now occupied the room – usurper by default.

She wandered back into the kitchen, drank the rest of her wine and observed the Christmas lights still draped in a starry Milky Way over her handbag. After a while, she reached for the pile of post Zosia had placed on the table and slit open the top envelope.

A plain card stamped with the House of Commons insignia was from Sadie who had written ‘love from Us’ and underlined ‘love’. A further note on the left-hand side of the card revealed penitence: ‘Sorry about this.’ And ‘PS Yup, Christmas *is* designed to torture women. PPS Give Tom a kiss from me.’

‘Wretch,’ murmured Annie. How often did she and Sadie speak? Practically every day. Had they sworn not to send each other Christmas cards? Yes. But the (sweetly duplicitous) joke was that Annie had already posted hers to Sadie. ‘Sorry about this,’ she had written on the left-hand side of the card – and inserted a handwritten piece of paper: ‘Dearest Sadie. You make me laugh so much. Try not to kill Andrew over the holiday.’

Each knew exactly what the other was driving at. It had been obvious from the moment they'd met a decade since when Sadie had turned up with Andrew on an MP's fact-finding hospital visit to St Brigid's. Having negotiated the arid patch between her second and third marriages, during which she had fled to England from the US, Sadie brimmed with thankfulness and relief. Annie was more or less coasting through her marriage and worried that her responses to life had become muted. Yet, they recognized each other as cut from the same cloth. True, if she and Tom had still been talking, really talking, really in tune with each other, and Sadie had been as settled as she was now, the quality and energy of their friendship might have been less intense. For a start, there would have been less necessity for the deep trawl of each other's thoughts and minds.

Annie worked through the rest of the cards, placing to one side those that could be pinned to a ribbon and hung in the sitting room and, on a separate pile, those that required a response.

'Give Tom a kiss from me.'

Annie frowned. She recollected a fleeting and careful meeting of their mouths on Tom's last birthday. Well meant. Dutiful even, but nothing more. ('I am drunk on you,' he had once said, after kissing her.) But since then?

She opened the final card, which was large and expensive-looking, and the angel from Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks* winged into the kitchen. Characteristically shadowed in the artist's unmistakable manner, typically mysterious, heavy-lidded, yearning, he was both messenger and guardian, carrying secrets he would never tell.

Something about him – a sadness, a darkness, loss –

spoke to Annie as she sat on in the empty house in which there was no Tom, no Jake or Emily. No Mia.

No one.

Traditionally, May weddings are unlucky but Tom and Annie didn't care about superstition and went ahead. Ignoring superstition was part and parcel of their supremely assured, unencumbered-by-the-past generation's behaviour. They told themselves that they were obliged to cut through the taboos of the past – so a May wedding it was. (Anyway, it turned out to be cheaper than one in June.)

In the early days, Tom might well have said on coming home: 'Tell me everything about your day.' In the early days, Annie almost certainly would have been agog to know what was going on in the World Service and why. As the young wife and then new mother, she remained utterly convinced of the importance of Tom's work. This belief did not waver even when he began to come home later and later – until she realized that she was not coping very well. 'I'm not a piece of elastic,' she warned him. 'Sooner or later I'll snap.'

Tom replied, 'I promise – I promise to do more.'

He had observed his vow as best he could. Battling with his schedules, he had pitched up at the Nativity play featuring the twins as Mary and Joseph, sat beside Annie, held her hand and almost wept with pride – which made Annie's knees go weak with love for him. 'Thank God I didn't miss seeing them, Annie.' He got to the interviews with the head teacher, who wanted to discuss why it might be that Emily had taken to hiding in the lavatories over break, and to the

regular gritty exchanges with Jake's science and maths teachers and, praise be, kept his temper.

All noted and applauded. Yes. *Yes*. That was what Annie had asked of Tom and he had made heroic efforts to oblige: 'Of course I want to be there for the children.' All the same, as Tom rose in the hierarchy, she sensed the balance shifting and his withdrawal into a place where she and the children were unwelcome. Little by little. So imperceptible that, to begin with, Annie didn't spot it. 'You are my life, Annie.' 'And you are mine, Tom.' Poetry and the moonlight had to fade, was fading, did fade – 'How do I love thee, Annie? Let me count the ways.' But this was to open a door into a cold, barren place.

She took to observing herself critically in the mirror – were her eyes growing dull, and what had happened to her arms? – then gave up eating butter during the week. Wonderful, delicious butter – bad. Horrible, oily, non-transgressive substitute – good. Who was kidding whom? Even if (by some glorious witchery) her arms became as toned as Madonna's, she knew she was missing the point. The early accord struck at the beginning of their marriage was fading.

'What sort of life is this?' she had asked, when Tom took to going into the office on Saturday mornings after the twins had left primary school. On that occasion he had grabbed her around the waist and drew her close.

'Ours,' he had replied. 'What sort of question is that, silly?' His hand tightened. 'Annie, I can't afford not to be there. Can you see that? Do you understand?'

'I do. And I don't.'

'I love my job. Please, Annie, support me, and one day I'll do the same for you.'

‘I want to you to be happy,’ she told him, searching his face for the key to draw him back. ‘I want you to succeed.’ But he was looking through and beyond her, down the street and into the office where, for the time being, the greater part of him wished to be. He threw out a decoy: ‘Annie, I love you. Truly.’ Annie had no doubt that he meant what he said. But the nuances were shifting, for she understood instinctively that Tom didn’t mean it in the way he used to.

The ironies were not lost on her. (Neither, to be fair, were they lost on Tom.) What she had first so admired in him – the consuming, passionate commitment to his work – had ended up stealing a march on them. It had been like travelling with the dearest and most trusted of companions who, having agreed on the pace, the distance and the final destination, had run on ahead. Without reaching out a hand. Without warning.

How does one mourn something that is not technically broken? She posed the question to herself over the years, searched for the answer and, at times, experienced a sinking sense of loss and panic – because there was a difference between being married and being together. She could not quite believe that the silence and the space opening up between them were happening. She could not quite believe that she and Tom might fail.

Then Tom missed Jake’s big sixth-form match. ‘How could you? How *could* you?’ Annie raged at him. He was angry with himself and bluffed, ‘I have to network. Everyone does.’ By that stage Annie had her job at St Brigid’s Hospital and longed to say, ‘And I don’t?’ But it was too crude a response to their current predicament, a combination of

raising children and working – and, working herself, she understood only too well the forces that pulled a parent this way and that. ‘We have to do better,’ she told Tom. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘We must.’

‘I wish, Tom . . .’

It was yet another Saturday morning and Tom was heading for the door. ‘You wish what?’

‘That we – or the children at least – were as important as your work.’ Thickly spreading a tuna-and-mayo (forbidden) mixture on ciabatta, tucking bottles of raspberry smoothie and water into the cool-bag to assemble a picnic. They were going to Thorpe Park to terrify themselves on roller-coasters (‘Mum will wimp out’), eat candy floss and other dietetically unsound delights, and the children had been heading towards excited hysteria – until Tom had announced he couldn’t make it after all. A silence fell, as thick as the tuna-and-mayo sludge slapped between the bread, and he felt it. Oh, yes, Tom felt it. He hovered in the doorway. ‘Stop it, Annie. Stop making trouble for me.’ She bit back the words *But aren’t you making trouble for yourself?*

As it turned out, he had been.

In the still, dark, quiet house, Annie applied lipstick in the mirror and smoothed down her hair. It made her feel better. She ran her finger around the edge of her lip to tidy it up . . . and her hand froze. An excited, radiant face was reflected back. It was hers . . . but not hers, for it belonged to the past. In its grey eyes and yearning expression could be read an anticipation of life, a dreamy confidence that all

would be well. This was the girl who had looked up from her book to watch Tom talking to his mother, or to snatch a glimpse of Tom reading, or to tease him with lascivious glances over a table while they ate the meal – shepherd's pie, stew, fishcakes – she had prepared. This was the girl who had in all innocence imagined that, with sufficient energy and good intentions, life could be manipulated for the good of everyone.

In that prelapsarian age, she and Tom had watched over the other with the careful attention of guardian angels, had listened to each other's heartbeat with a sense of astonishment – and sometimes panicked because a heart's beat was so fragile. Then the pulse had fluttered because existence was a wonderful, radiant thing – so much so that sometimes, when she thought about it, it made her cry.

In the sitting room, she pinned the angel card to the ribbon with the others, stepped back and waited for someone to come home.

Chapter Two

In February, Tom arrived home from work as a troubled national bank was finally taken into state ownership and, in tandem with the sepulchral-toned newsreader on the radio, announced, 'It's possible we're in for a recession.'

Annie switched off the radio. For some days now she had been listening to reports – US sub-prime problems, the January slump in the UK stock market etc., etc.: money traders were predicting a global downturn and a fall in interest rates. 'I wouldn't have known.'

'Very funny.'

He frowned and turned away. She frowned and turned away, but not before noticing that Tom had a pallor – almost unearthly – which had not been there when he had left that morning.

He asked, 'Supper when?'

'Fifteen minutes or so.'

He fidgeted with the evening paper. 'Good day?' He dredged the question out of a diminishing stockpile of good manners, and without enthusiasm.

'We've got through.'

'So you did.'

The radio pattered on with its story of economic upheavals. Outside a car horn hooted rudely.

Tom searched in the wine rack and alighted on the bottle of red that Annie knew he had been saving for a celebration.

Immersed in thought and still worryingly pale, he poured out a measure, swirled it around the glass, took a mouthful and swallowed it. Then he recollected his wife. ‘Sorry, would you like one?’

Annie accepted it, the glass chilly between her fingers. ‘Actually, someone died today who shouldn’t have,’ she admitted. Now senior manager at St Brigid’s, she encountered death most days. Of course, any unexpected death was awful and regretted, but this one would be a source of trouble.

Tom appeared to be struggling with a strong emotion, but he managed to say politely, ‘I’m sorry.’

It was then Annie realized that something was wrong, really wrong. ‘Tom, what’s up?’ She placed an experimental hand on his arm.

‘*Nothing.*’

‘OK. OK.’ She stepped back and, after a moment, continued: ‘There’s bound to be lawyers in. Possibly a court case. The patient was admitted with pains in his stomach but was left on a gurney in the corridor in A and E and died between checks.’ She felt the throb of anxiety and sorrow for the people who would be grieving. ‘It’s pretty dreadful.’

With an effort Tom said, ‘I’m sorry . . . It will mean trouble for you all.’

Mollified by his attempt to sympathize, she said, ‘Yes. It will.’

She hoicked the remains of a ready-made *coq au vin*, a packet of mange-tout and early Jersey Royals out of the fridge and set about making supper. No longer much of a cook, she had become adept at the on-line delivery system. ‘Tom, he was only thirty-two. That’s barely time to breathe.’

Imagine if it was Jake or Emily. Or . . . Mia. What would she do? In a way, she did know. Quite literally, she would not be able to live if something happened to them. That thought was inadmissible, too. She plucked a kitchen knife from the wooden block and reached for the packet of mange-tout.

She was expecting Tom to respond for he held strong views on the National Health Service and, occasionally, they had talked over the way it was going. Then she noticed he had refilled his glass pretty smartish. ‘Tom, are you sure nothing’s wrong?’

He refused to meet her gaze. ‘Yes . . . no. It’s fine. See you in a minute.’ He gathered up glass, bottle and briefcase and headed into the hall.

She heard his heavy tread up the stairs and the snap of his bedroom door shutting. She picked up the mange-tout and slashed open the plastic covering.

. . . ‘Dear Annie,’ read the note that had arrived in her university pigeon-hole. ‘Please don’t come to Redpath’s lecture on Thursday as I won’t be able to concentrate. I am sick with longing for you and I have to get my essay written on whatever the old poseur is sounding off about otherwise they will chuck me out.’ It was signed: ‘An Admirer’, and included the PS ‘A clue . . . (reasonably) tall, dark and handsome.’

Of course she had hastened to the lecture hall, sat in the hushed and stuffy auditorium and listened without understanding a word to Redpath striving to communicate the mysteries of semiotics. Prickles ran up her neck and her skin felt on fire. At the finish, she swivelled around – and encountered a locked-on, intense blue gaze.

Tom was (1) tall – OK, reasonably tall, (2) dark, (3) not so much handsome as a rogue with raven’s plumage, which was much, much better. Even if his appearance hadn’t unearthed a mysterious need in her, of which until then she had been ignorant, she would have fallen for his energy. And his humour.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ he told her, many times, and for those opening months in their relationship she was led to believe that she was a unique blend of Helen of Troy, Cleopatra and Marilyn Monroe. Her skin glowed, her waist shrank to a tiny circle and she lost all desire for food and possessions.

Prince Tom Charming shook her awake, proffered a key to an exciting life – and then kissed her. It was a fairytale, she confided to her older sister, Lydia. Without knowing, she had been waiting for Tom Charming.

Shortly after they graduated, Tom walked into a job at the BBC World Service. Shortly after that, he arrived at Annie’s flat with a bunch of red roses, so dark they were almost black, and begged her to marry him.

‘So, what did you say?’ asked Lydia, when Annie rang her.

‘What do you think . . . ?’

She and Tom ate the supermarket-confected *coq au vin* in silence. These days, eating in silence was not unusual. Neither was it hostile. Just neutral. Actually, Annie found it useful because, after a day of talking and organizing, it gave her time to think.

She speared a piece of chicken on her fork, slathered it in the wine sauce and placed in her mouth. Tuesday

tomorrow . . . and she and the team would have to face the aftermath of the patient's death. Again the throb of anxiety and sorrow. Dead or alive, the search for a child could never cease. Never. You caught the back of their head in a crowd, their ghostly presence at the Christmas table, an echo of their voice in the garden. Deliberately, she concentrated on other things. The little toe on her right foot was sore. Shoes too small? She had been seduced by the linen sheets she had spotted in the boutique off Bond Street. The colour of Devon cream, they had the smoothest of weaves and a thread count off the register . . . Write a shopping list . . . What about the evening dance class she was toying with?

Her plate was almost empty but Tom had barely touched his. 'You eat so fast, Annie,' she could hear him say. These days it was a criticism, but once upon a time he might have added sweetly, lustfully, 'More time, then, for other things.' On that one, Sadie took Tom's side, saying, with that characteristic little shake of her blonde head, 'If you chew each mouthful fifty-two times you remain slim. It's simple.' What planet did these fifty-two-times chewers inhabit? Didn't they have jobs or small children? How was it possible to spend so much of the day masticating?

More time for other things . . . Like everything else, sex had its flowerings and nadirs. The long, delicious, subterranean episodes under duvets with Tom . . . or the wilder ones outside, when taking risks was easy, necessary even. The snatched, urgent, shuddery coming together while babies napped. Much later on, the perfunctory performances when Tom and she literally gasped for sleep, not orgasm, which always made them laugh. The gradual erosion of their emotional connection in favour of purely physical

sensation . . . then the gradual erosion of desire for each other. Then, since Mia . . . nothing. Or, rather, nothing truthful or meaningful. Or comforting or sustaining.

‘Sorry about the meal.’ Annie put down her knife and fork. ‘I didn’t have the energy to make anything. Hope you don’t mind.’

He didn’t look up. ‘I don’t expect you to cook.’

‘No, but I realize it’s expensive buying ready-made.’ She willed him to look up. ‘Tom, that’s one of the reasons I thought the kitchen needed a face-lift. It would prod me into action and I know you prefer homemade food.’

Impossible to place when exactly Annie had stopped enjoying being in the kitchen. Three children and a career had killed the urge to cook creatively (all that running around sourcing organic this and that). Then Mia had gone. Or was it that the overload in the media about cooking and cooks made her cross? Time was, she had immersed herself in the, frankly, almost pornographic prose of the best cookery writers, who described the texture of flaky pastry or the aroma of almond with precise and aching sensuality. She had read them, admired them but, when the going was tough, chunked them aside in favour of Mother’s Little Helper: the ready-made meal.

Time gone.

Have you, Annie Nicholson, taken happiness, sexual satiation and partnership for granted? Guilty as charged. She had taken for granted that, provided one stuck to the rules more or less, *things would be all right*. When they hadn’t been, the heart had gone out of her for cooking and such-like. Furthermore, she suspected Tom felt the same. She must ask him. She really must ask him. Some time.

Tom was struggling with a forkful. Too much wine, she thought. It always took his appetite away. He had got what he wanted – *the job* – and the material advantages with it, but it hadn't left him unscathed.

'Tom,' she said, out of the blue, 'has it all been worth it?'

His head reared up. 'Not now, Annie. Please.'

She speared a final flake of chicken on her fork and tried again: 'About the new kitchen. It's going to be nasty for a few days while they fit the units and I certainly won't be able to cook. But we can go out to eat. Or we can have a good lunch at our office canteens and just snack in the evening.'

Annie couldn't be sure, but had he winced?

In a few days' time (the schedule having been carefully worked out so that it would be ready by Easter, the pleasant, slightly ramshackle kitchen, with its large table and creaky sofa, was due for evisceration. Fashionable Shaker units in pale cream would be installed, plus an immensely expensive French range cooker. With the latter, the salesman had pointed out chattily, it was possible to cook for ten, twenty . . . No problem.

Cooking for twenty? Had she lost her wits lusting over its gleaming hob, its cast-iron trivets and two ovens? She had no desire to cook even for one. It was going to be, she had told Sadie a trifle hysterically, the equivalent of the most expensive hostess trolley ever.

Tom's glass was empty, and he helped himself to the last of the wine. 'Annie . . .'

She stiffened. He sounded choked, troubled.

'Phwoar! Am I wet?' Emily, their youngest, burst into the kitchen, dumped a couple of carrier bags and peeled off a

sodden mac to reveal tight jeans worn with two expensive (as Annie happened to know) T-shirts and a bulky tweed scarf twisted around the neck. The look was writer's chic, or Emily's interpretation of it.

Unburdened, she swung around. 'Hi, parents.' A deposit of last year's impacted leaves and mud fell from her shoe on to the floor. 'Sorry, sorry . . .' She wiped it up with a piece of kitchen roll, leaving a muddy smudge on the tiles.

Annie kidnapped the soaking mac and hung it over the boiler. Emily had been babysitting for a neighbour attending a parents' evening. Tomorrow her daughter would board a school coach and help to supervise the fourth-form outing to a local swimming-pool. The day after that, she resumed babysitting duties with yet another neighbour. This was not a programme designed to inspire faith in Emily's future earnings.

Please think, Emily. Annie was deeply afraid that her daughter was condemning herself to a fretful, fractious existence. Then she scolded herself for lack of faith and vision and tried not to mind that, in the eighteen months since she had left university, the tally of Emily's completed work added up to a short story published in *Metaphor*, a magazine with large literary pretensions and small circulation (Annie and Tom had bought up at least twenty copies and distributed them discreetly to friends and relations), and a novel that a couple of literary agents could not *quite* see how they might handle. 'But it was a close-run thing,' wrote the kinder one.

'If it had been any good,' a white-faced Emily had admitted a few weeks ago, 'I'd be there by now. It means I'm no good.'

‘Listen to me, Em,’ Tom had intervened. ‘My publishing contacts tell me it’s nothing to do with you being good or bad. It’s to do with luck. And positioning. And how many celebrities they’re trying to buy that week. And who has had a good day or a bad day when they look at your stuff. Nothing more.’

This was Cynical Tom, who took a bow ever more frequently. The other side of him, Idealistic Tom, had every faith in his daughter and applauded her willingness to forgo a settled income and a career path. ‘There’s something heroic about it,’ he told Annie, mentioning in the same breath that he planned to give Emily an allowance to help her through the initial stages.

Now, in the soon-to-be-upgraded kitchen, Annie observed her husband. The raven’s plumage had dulled and she could no longer interpret the light in his eye – and there were reasons for that. They lived together, but not together. Thoughts of leaving Tom ran like an uneven seam under the everyday routines and, once or twice, had forced themselves to the surface. One of the worst crises had been after Mia left and an uncaring Annie had served up a rotten dinner to Tom’s colleagues. Reason for divorce, Mrs Nicholson? Answer: a tough stew. Yes? No? Almost. But that would have been too simple. The main reasons were too painful . . . impossible to discuss. Buried. *Buried*.

She pictured Tom and herself in a boat, paddling furiously in opposite directions. But not for very long because the picture winded her. Instead she chose to think that she and Tom had worked out a *modus vivendi* and it did them fine, much as the serviceable knickers and vest her mother had insisted Annie wear as a child had done fine.

‘How many pages?’ Tom was asking Emily.

Emily shook out a fake-leopardskin jacket from a Topshop bag and draped it over her shoulders. ‘How cool is this?’

‘How many jackets do you need?’ asked Annie, but secretly she was pleased that Emily had indulged in something so normal (and unnecessary) as shopping.

Emily settled herself beside her father. ‘Pages, Dad? Three.’

Three. Annie did the maths. If this latest novel, embarked on this morning, was approximately four hundred pages long, it suggested that *The End* would not arrive for another 133 days. And that would be the first draft – Emily had taken care to brief her parents that a minimum of three drafts was always necessary.

Tom put his arm around his daughter. ‘Title?’ Tender and caring as ever with his favourite child.

Emily raised a pair of cloned blue eyes to her father. Intense, molten desire to succeed burned in their depths, and Annie shuddered for her. ‘I’m working on it. *Time Regained*?’

‘Time bloody lost, you mean,’ Annie could hear Jake saying. She smothered a grin. ‘Think that one has been taken.’

‘Want some help, Em?’ Despite whatever was troubling him, Tom was putting himself out.

Emily leaned against him. ‘Thanks, Dad, but no.’

They were peas in a pod, those two, despite the adolescent storms and tantrums to which Emily had royally treated them. Emily had helped herself to a greater dollop of Tom’s DNA than the twins had – the blue eyes, raven-black hair,

set of the jaw, and the tiny characteristic gestures that mimicked her father's. Other markers, even to the most unobservant, were their bouts of loftiness and of hysterical laughter.

Annie couldn't help laughing. 'You two look so sweet together.'

The phone rang. Tom disentangled himself from Emily and got up to answer it. 'Jake . . . all well?' He didn't wait for an answer before he said, 'I'll hand you over to your mother. We'll speak some time.'

'Hi, Mum.' Jake was his usual cheerful self. 'I just wanted to report that Maisie's check-up was fine. She's absolutely spot-on average for a twelve-month-old.' Annie listened indulgently as Jake chatted on. He planned to invite them over for tea on Maisie's birthday – he and Jocasta had been talking about a holiday and he was *really* pleased with his current work-in-progress. He signed off, 'Big kiss, Mum.'

Jake always made Annie's heart feel lighter. In many ways he was like Tom used to be. Tom disagreed – 'We're chalk and cheese, Annie' – and had once admitted that he never felt quite at ease with his son. It was true: something had gone wrong – or, rather, had never developed – between them. Annie remembered well explaining to a small boy clutching a teddy bear that his father was not coming home because he had to talk to lots of people at work. 'But he never talks to me,' said Jake. Since Jake and Jocasta's marriage, and Maisie's arrival, father and son had not seen much of each other at all.

And Mia?

Annie's new-year resolution had been not to think of Mia. This was broken every day. Even the merest whisper

in her mind of her daughter prodded the wound. How was it possible, she asked herself, for the hundredth, thousandth time, that the dancing, coppery child, who had desired nothing so much as to please her mother, had ended up turning her back on them all?

Heavens . . . it had been only yesterday she was taking the children to swim in the noisy, chlorinated swimming-pool. There, a scarf bound (oh, futile gesture) around her head to stop the waterlogged air whirling her curls into corkscrews, she had released them into another element. First, a cautious romp in the paddling-pool, but as time passed, she, the mother, was relegated to a wary guardianship at the shallow end where she watched them bob and dive like downy ducks. Then came the day when she stood at one end of the pool and the three of them swam towards her. Little sleek otter heads. Thin bird limbs. Water churning in their haste to reach her. They were part of her, and again the thought scorched across her brain that if one of them was to die she would die too. Yet their new mastery of the water, the alien element, marked the beginning of a separation – which prefigured another kind of death. *For which, Mrs Nicholson, you had better be prepared.*

But not yet, she had prayed silently, as she knelt by the side of the pool to greet her excited, triumphant team with a big smile. *Not yet.*

That had been long ago and far away – a time when the family had still been whole. Annie got to her feet. ‘I’ll do the washing-up.’