

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN
SOMEONE IS JUST ...



TOO NICE

SALLY NICHOLLS

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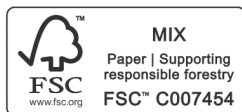
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Chapter 1

TOO NICE!

“My stepmother’s all right,” said Abby. “She’s just too nice. That’s all. Too nice!”

“Urgh,” Anna replied. She tipped her crisp packet up so all the last crumbs fell into her mouth. They were sitting in their corner of the canteen at school. “You mean she’s all goody-two-shoes and perfect?”

“No ... not exactly,” Abby said. She opened her lunchbox and stared at the lunch her stepmother, Jen, had made her. Cheese sandwiches with lettuce. A Fruit Corner. Grapes. Cherry tomatoes, and cucumber cut into little cubes. Posh food. It was much nicer than the packed lunches Abby used to make for herself. “It just feels *fake*.”

“Yuck,” said Finn. He was eating chips covered in ketchup. Abby used to eat chips covered in ketchup too. Before Jen moved in.

“I wish my stepmother was *too nice*,” said Halima gloomily. “Mine is always going on at me. *Halima, tidy your room. Halima, do your homework. Halima, tell your brothers to stop killing each other, will you?* I can’t do everything on my own.”

“I like your stepmother,” said Abby. She did. Halima’s stepmother was always bossing Halima around, but you could tell they loved each other really. “She’s *real*,” Abby added.

“Too real,” said Halima. “I wish she would be fake nice to me sometimes. It would make a change!”

Abby’s mum had died when she was little. Abby couldn’t remember her at all. Her dad told her lots of stories. And she had a picture of her that she liked to look at sometimes. But that was it.

Abby had never really minded not having a mum. She liked that she and Dad made decisions together. They talked about things, like where

they should go on holiday and what takeaway to order. They were a team.

They liked the same things too. They played video games together. They watched TV. Dad liked *Doctor Who* episodes from the 1960s and old *Star Trek*. Abby liked the way he got all excited when he talked about them. She liked teasing him about the bad special effects. She liked introducing him to the things she loved too. They watched all the Marvel films and TV programmes together. Dad pretended not to like them, but he did really.

Abby and Dad were friends. Their family was small, but it *worked*.

And then Jen came along.

Jen was Dad's girlfriend. They'd been together for six months now. He'd had girlfriends before. But Abby had been little then. She hadn't understood what was going on. She'd just thought he had a new friend who was a lady.

This time, Abby had been excited about meeting Jen. Abby loved her dad. She wanted him to be happy. She thought it was cool that he had a girlfriend. She helped him tidy the house. She even bought some tulips and put them in a

vase on the table. They looked so nice there, red and hopeful.

Jen was a librarian. She worked at the school where Dad was a teacher. She was small and pretty, with short dark hair and dangly earrings.

Jen talked a lot.

Abby opened the door the first time Jen came over, and Jen started talking.

“Abby! How lovely!” Jen cried. “I’ve been so excited about meeting you. I’ve heard so much about you! Your dad’s so proud of you! Well, you know that.”

Jen stepped forward and held out her arms for a hug. Abby hadn’t expected that. She wasn’t sure what to do. She didn’t mind being hugged. But this was the first time they’d met. Wasn’t hugging a bit full on for a first meeting?

It felt rude to say so. She let Jen hug her. But she felt herself getting small and shy, which wasn’t at all how she’d wanted to behave. She knew Dad was proud of her. He was *her* dad. Why was Jen acting like she knew him better than Abby did?

“Oh, I love your top!” Jen was still talking. “That blue really suits you – it matches your eyes.”

“Thank you,” Abby said again. It was just an old top. It wasn’t anything special. There was an ink stain on the hem. She wanted to say this to Jen, but she thought it might sound rude. It made her feel funny though, as if Jen was lying to her.

“Why don’t you come inside?” said Dad, moving into the house.

Jen and Abby followed. Abby was still trying to work out why Jen made her feel so uncomfortable. Dad hardly ever said things like “I love your top”. Only if she was wearing something really special, like a dress for a wedding or something. Was it just because Jen was a woman? Would Abby’s mum have said, “Oh, what a lovely top!” if she’d been alive?

Did Jen really mean it, or was she just trying to make Abby like her?

“Oh, I love your top” was a *nice* thing to say to someone.

So why did it make Abby feel so small?

Jen was still talking. “What a lovely house! Oh, and tulips! I love tulips!”

“They were Abby’s idea,” said Dad. Abby wished he hadn’t said that. She waited for Jen to start telling her how much she loved tulips.

“I love tulips!” Jen said, right on cue. “They’re so cheerful, aren’t they? They remind me of my grandmother – she always had tulips in the garden when we went to visit. What a kind thought!”

Abby had chosen the tulips because they were the smallest bunch of flowers in the shop, and she and Dad only had little vases. She didn’t say this. She changed the subject.

“This is the kitchen,” Abby said. “And this is the garden.”

But it was the same wherever they went. Jen *gushed*. About Abby. About the house. About Dad.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you!” Jen kept saying. She filled the whole house with her words.

And Abby felt smaller and smaller, and more and more squashed.