

The Mother-in-Law

Sally Hepworth



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1

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Lucy

I am folding laundry at my kitchen table when the police car pulls up. There's no fanfare—no sirens or flashing lights—yet that little niggle starts in the pit of my stomach, Mother Nature's warning that all is not well. It's getting dark out, early evening, and the neighbors' porch lights are starting to come on. It's *dinnertime*. Police don't arrive on your doorstep at dinnertime unless something is wrong.

I glance through the archway to the living room where my slothful children are stretched across different pieces of furniture, angled toward their respective devices. Alive. Unharmed. In good health apart from, perhaps, a mild screen addiction. Seven-year-old Archie is watching a family play Wii games on the big iPad; four-year-old Harriet is watching little girls in America unwrap toys on the little iPad. Even two-year-old Edie is staring, slack-jawed, at

the television. I feel some measure of comfort that my family is all under this roof. At least most of them are. *Dad*, I think suddenly. *Oh no, please not Dad.*

I look back at the police car. The headlights illuminate a light mist of rain.

At least it's not the children, a guilty little voice in my head whispers. *At least it isn't Ollie*. Ollie is on the back deck, grilling burgers. Safe. He came home from work early today, not feeling well apparently, though he doesn't seem particularly unwell. In any case, he's alive and I'm wholeheartedly grateful for that.

The rain has picked up a little now, turning the mist into distinct, precise raindrops. The police kill the engine, but don't get out right away. I ball up a pair of Ollie's socks and place them on top of his pile and then reach for another pair. I should stand up, go to the door, but my hands continue to fold on autopilot, as if by continuing to act normally the police car will cease to exist and all will be right in the world again. But it doesn't work. Instead, a uniformed policeman emerges from the driver's seat.

"Muuuum!" Harriet calls. "Edie is watching the TV!"

Two weeks ago, a prominent news journalist had spoken out publicly about her "revulsion" that children under the age of three were exposed to TV, actually going so far as to call it "child abuse." Like most Australian mothers, I'd been incensed about this and followed with the predictable diatribe of, "What would she know? She probably has a team of nannies and hasn't looked after her children for a day in her life!" before swiftly instating the "no screens for Edie rule" which lasted until twenty minutes ago when I was on the phone with the energy company, and Edie decided to try the old "Mum, muuum, MUUUUUM . . ." trick until I relented, popping

on an episode of *Play School* and retreating to the bedroom to finish my phone call.

“It’s all right, Harriet,” I say, my eyes still on the window.

Harriet’s cross little face appears in front of me, her dark brown hair and thick fringe swishing around her face like a mop. “But you SAID . . .”

“Never mind what I said. A few minutes won’t hurt.”

The cop looks to be midtwenties, thirty at a push. His police hat is in his hand but he wedges it under one arm to tug at the front of his too-tight trousers. A short, rotund policewoman of a similar age gets out of the passenger side, her hat firmly on her head. They come around the car and start up the path side by side. They are definitely coming to our place. *Nettie*, I think suddenly. *It’s about Nettie.*

It’s possible. Ollie’s sister has certainly had her share of health issues lately. Or maybe it’s Patrick? Or is it something else entirely?

The fact is, part of me knows it’s not Nettie or Patrick, or Dad. It’s funny sometimes what you just *know*.

“Burgers are up.”

The fly screen door scrapes open and Ollie appears at the back door holding a plate of meat. The girls flock to him and he snaps his “crocodile tongs” while they jump up and down, squealing loudly enough to nearly drown out the knock at the door.

Nearly.

“Was that the door?” Ollie raises an eyebrow, curious rather than concerned. In fact, he looks animated. *An unexpected guest on a week-night! Who could it be?*

Ollie is the social one of the two of us, the one that volunteers on the Parents and Friends’ committee at the kids’ school because “it’s a good way to meet people,” who hangs over the back fence to

say hi to the neighbors if he hears them talking in the garden, who approaches people who look vaguely familiar and tries to figure out if they know each other. A people person. To Ollie, an unexpected knock on the door during the week signals excitement rather than doom.

But, of course, he hasn't seen the cop car.

Edie tears down the corridor. "I get it, I get it."

"Hold on a minute, Edie-bug," Ollie says, looking for somewhere to put down the tray of burgers. He isn't fast enough though because by the time he finds some counter space, Edie has already tossed open the door.

"Poleeth!" she says, awed.

This, of course, is the part where I should run after her, intercept the police at the door and apologize, but my feet are concreted to the floor. Luckily, Ollie is already jogging up behind Edie, ruffling her hair playfully.

"G'day," he says to the cops. He glances over his shoulder back into the house, his mind caught up in the action of a few seconds ago, perhaps wondering if he remembered to turn off the gas canister or checking that he'd placed the burger plate securely on the counter. It's the classic, unassuming behavior of someone about to get bad news. I actually feel like I am watching us all on a TV show—the handsome clueless dad, the cute toddler. The regular suburban family who are about to have their lives turned inside out . . . ruined forever.

"What can I do for you?" Ollie says finally, turning his attention back to the cops.

"I'm Sr. Constable Arthur," I hear a woman say, though I can't

see her from my vantage point, “and this is Constable Perkins. Are you Oliver Goodwin?”

“I am.” Ollie smiles down at Edie, even throws her a wink. It’s enough to convince me that I’m being overly dramatic. Even if there’s bad news, it may not be that bad. It may not even be *our* bad news. Perhaps one of the neighbors was burgled? Police always *canvased the area* after something like that, didn’t they?

Suddenly I look forward to that moment in a few minutes’ time when I know that everything’s fine. I think about how Ollie and I will laugh about how paranoid I was. *You won’t believe what I thought*, I’ll say to him, and he’ll roll his eyes and smile. *Always worrying*, he’ll say. *How do you ever get anything done with all that worrying?*

But when I edge forward a few paces, I see that my worrying isn’t unnecessary. I see it in the somberness of the policeman’s expression, in the downward turn of the corners of his mouth.

The policewoman glances at Edie, then back at Ollie. “Is there somewhere we can talk . . . privately?”

The first traces of uncertainty appear on Ollie’s face. His shoulders stiffen and he stands a little bit taller. Perhaps unconsciously, he pushes Edie back from the door, behind him, shielding her from something.

“Edie-bug, would you like me to put on *The Wiggles*?” I say, stepping forward finally.

Edie shakes her head resolutely, her gaze not shifting from the police. Her soft round face is alight with interest; her chunky, wobbly legs are planted with improbable firmness.

“Come on, honey,” I try again, sweeping a hand over her pale gold hair. “How about an ice cream?”

This is more of a dilemma for Edie. She glances at me, watching for a long moment, assessing whether I can be trusted. Finally I shout for Archie to get out the Paddle Pops and she scampers off down the hallway.

“Come in,” Ollie says to the police, and they do, sending me a quick, polite smile. A *sorry* smile. A smile that pierces my heart, unpicks me a little. *It’s not the neighbors*, that smile says. This bad news is yours.

There aren’t a lot of private communal areas in our house so Ollie guides the police to the dining room and pulls out a couple of chairs. I follow, pushing my newly folded laundry into a basket. The piles collapse into each other like tumbling buildings. The police sit on the chairs, Ollie balances on the arm of the sofa, and I remain sharply upright, stiff. Bracing.

“Firstly I need to confirm that you are relatives of Diana Goodwin—”

“Yes,” Ollie says, “she’s my mother.”

“Then I’m very sorry to inform you,” the policewoman starts, and I close my eyes because I already know what she is going to say.

My mother-in-law is dead.

Lucy

Ten years ago . . .

Someone once told me that you have two families in your life—the one you are born into and the one you choose. But that’s not entirely true, is it? Yes, you may get to choose your partner, but you don’t, for instance, choose your children. You don’t choose your brothers- or sisters-in-law, you don’t choose your partner’s spinster aunt with the drinking problem or cousin with the revolving door of girlfriends who don’t speak English. More importantly, you don’t choose your mother-in-law. The cackling mercenaries of fate determine it all.

“Hello?” Ollie calls. “Anybody home?”

I stand in the yawning foyer of the Goodwins’ home and pan around at the marble extending out in every direction. A winding staircase sweeps from the basement up to the first floor beneath a

magnificent crystal chandelier. I feel like I've stepped into the pages of a *Hello!* magazine spread, the ones with the ridiculous photos of celebrities sprawling on ornate furniture, and on grassy knolls in riding boots with golden retrievers at their feet. I've always pictured that this is what the inside of Buckingham Palace must look like, or if not Buckingham, at least one of the smaller palaces—St. James's or Clarence House.

I try to catch Ollie's eye, to . . . what? Admonish him? Cheer? Quite frankly I'm not sure but it's moot since he's already charging into the house, announcing our arrival. To say I'm unprepared for this is the most glorious of understatements. When Ollie had suggested I come to his parents' house for dinner, I'd been picturing lasagna and salad in a quaint, blond-brick bungalow, the kind of home I'd grown up in. I'd pictured an adoring mother clasping a photo album of sepia-colored baby photos and a brusquely proud but socially awkward father, clasping a can of beer and a cautious smile. Instead, artwork and sculptures were uplit and gleaming, and the parents, socially awkward or otherwise, are nowhere to be seen.

"Ollie!" I catch Ollie's elbow and am about to whisper furiously when a plump ruddy-faced man rushes through a large arched doorway at the back of the house, clutching a glass of red wine.

"Dad!" Ollie cries. "There you are!"

"Well, well. Look who the cat dragged in."

Tom Goodwin is the very opposite of his tall, dark-haired son. Short, overweight and unstylish, his red-checked shirt is tucked into chinos that are belted below his substantial paunch. He throws his arms around his son, and Ollie thumps his old man on the back.

"You must be Lucy," Tom says, after releasing Ollie. He takes

my hand and pumps it heartily, letting out a low whistle. "My word. Well done, son."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Goodwin." I smile.

"Tom! Call me Tom." He smiles at me like he's won the Easter raffle, then he appears to remember himself. "Diana! Diana, where are you? They're here!"

After a moment or two Ollie's mother emerges from the back of the house. She's wearing a white shirt and navy slacks and brushing nonexistent crumbs from the front of her shirt. I suddenly wonder about my outfit choice, a full-skirted 1950s red and white polka-dot dress that had belonged to my mother. I thought it would be charming but now it just seems outlandish and stupid, especially given Ollie's mum's plain and demure attire.

"I'm sorry," she says, from several paces away. "I didn't hear the bell."

"This is Lucy," Tom says.

Diana extends her hand. As I reach for it, I notice that she is almost a full head taller than her husband, despite her flat shoes, and she is thin as a street post, apart from a slight middle-aged thickening at the waist. She has silver hair cut into an elegant, chin-length bob, a straight Roman nose, and unlike Tom, bears a strong resemblance to her son.

I also notice that her handshake is cold.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Goodwin," I say, dropping her hand to offer the bunch of flowers I'm carrying. I'd insisted on stopping at the florist on the way, even though Ollie had said, "Flowers aren't really her thing."

"Flowers are every woman's thing," I'd replied with a roll of my

eyes. But as I take in her lack of jewelry, her unpainted nails and sensible shoes, I start to get the feeling that I'm wrong.

"Hello, Mum," Ollie says, pulling his mother in a bear hug, which she accepts, if not quite embraces. I know, from many conversations with Ollie, that he adores his mother. He practically bursts with pride as he talks about the charity she runs single-handedly for refugees in Australia, many of them pregnant or with small children. *Of course* she would think flowers were trivial, I realize suddenly. I'm an idiot. Perhaps I should have brought baby clothes, or maternity supplies?

"All right, Ollie," she says after a moment or two, when he doesn't let her go. She pulls herself upright. "I haven't even had a chance to say hello properly to Lucy!"

"Why don't we head to the lounge for some drinks and we can all get to know each other better," Tom says, and we all turn toward the back of the house. That's when I notice a face peeking around the corner.

"Nettie!" Ollie cries.

If there is a lack of resemblance between Ollie and Tom, there is no doubt Antoinette is Tom's daughter. She has his ruddy cheeks and stockiness, while at the same time being endearingly pretty. Stylish too, in a grey woolen dress and black suede boots. According to Ollie, his younger sister is married, childless and some sort of executive at a marketing company who is often asked to speak at conferences about women and the glass ceiling. At thirty-two years old, only two years older than me, I'd found this impressive and a little intimidating, but it is all swept under the rug when she greets me with an enormous bear hug. The Goodwins, it appears, are huggers.

All of them, perhaps, except Diana.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Nettie says. She links her arm with mine and I am engulfed in a cloud of expensive-smelling perfume. “Come and meet my husband, Patrick.”

Nettie drags me through an arched doorway, past what looks like an elevator—*an elevator!* As we walk we pass framed artwork and floral arrangements, and photos of family holidays on the ski slopes and at the beach. There is one photo of Tom, Diana, Nettie and Ollie on camels in the desert with a pyramid in the background, all of them holding hands and raising their hands skyward.

Growing up, I used to go to the beach town of Portarlington for holidays, less than an hour’s drive from my house.

We stop in a room that is roughly the size of my apartment, filled with sofas and armchairs, huge, expensive-looking rugs and heavy wooden side tables. A gigantic man rises from an armchair.

“Patrick,” he says. His handshake is clammy but he looks apologetic so I pretend not to notice.

“Lucy. Nice to meet you.”

I’m not sure what I expected for Nettie—perhaps someone small, sharp, eager to please, like her. At six feet three inches, I thought Ollie was tall, but Patrick is positively mountain-like—six seven at least. Apart from his height, he reminds me a little of Tom, in his plaid shirt and chinos, his round face and eager smile. He has a knitted sweater around his shoulders, preppy-style.

With all greetings out of the way, Ollie, Tom and Patrick sink into the large couch and Diana and Nettie wander off toward a drinks table. I hesitate a moment, then fall into step beside the women.

“You sit down, Lucy,” Diana directs me.

“Oh, I’m happy to help—”

But Diana raises her hand like a stop sign. “Please,” she says. “Just sit.”

Diana is obviously trying to be polite, but I can’t help but feel a little rejected. She isn’t to know, of course, that I’d fantasized about bumping elbows with her in the kitchen, perhaps even facing a little salad crisis together that I could overcome by whipping up a make-shift dressing (a salad crisis was about all my culinary capabilities could stretch to). She isn’t to know that I’d imagined nestling up to her as she took me through photo albums, family trees and long-winded stories that Ollie would groan about. She doesn’t know I’d planned to spend the entire evening by her side, and by the time we went home, she’d be as enamored with me as I’d be with her.

Instead, I sat.

“So, you and Ollie work together?” Tom asks me, as I plant myself next to Ollie on the sofa.

“We do,” I say. “Have done for three years.”

“Three years?” Tom feigns shock. “Took your time, didn’t you, mate?”

“It was a slow burn,” Ollie says.

Ollie had been the classic, solid guy from work. The one always available to listen to my most terrible dating stories and offer a sympathetic shoulder. Ollie, unlike the powerful, take-charge assholes that I tended to date, was cheerful, unassuming and a consistently good guy. Most importantly, he adored me. It had taken me a while to realize it, but being adored was much nicer than being messed around by charismatic bastards.

“He isn’t your boss, is he?” Tom twinkles. It’s horrendously sexist, but it’s hard to be annoyed with Tom.

“Tom!” Diana chides, but it’s clear she finds it hard to be annoyed

with him too. She's back now with drinks, and she purses her lips in the manner of a mother trying to discipline her very cute, disobedient toddler. She hands me a glass of red wine and sits on the other side of Ollie.

"We're peers," I tell Tom. "I recruit for the technical positions, Ollie does support staff. We work closely together."

It began, oddly enough, in a dream. A bizarre, meandering dream that started at my great-aunt Gwen's ninetieth birthday and ended at the house where my best friend from primary school lived, but she wasn't a little girl anymore, she was an old lady. But somewhere in the middle, Ollie was there. And he was different somehow. Sexier. The next day, at work, I sent him an email saying he'd been in my dream the night before. The expected "What was I doing?" banter followed, with an undercurrent. Ollie's office was right next door to mine, but we'd always sent each other emails from the next office—witty commentary about our shared boss's Donald Trump hair, suspicious behavior at the office Christmas party, requests for sushi orders for lunch. But that day, it was different. By the end of the day my heart was skipping a beat when his name appeared in my in-box.

For a while I'd kept my head about it. It was a rendezvous, a tryst . . . not a relationship and certainly not *the* relationship. But when I noticed him giving money to the drunk at the train station every morning (even after the drunk abused him and accused him of stealing his booze); when he'd spotted a lost little boy at the shopping center and immediately lifted him up over his head and asked if he could see his mum anywhere; when he began to occupy more and more of my thoughts, a realization came: this is it. He's the one.

I tell Ollie's family the story (minus the dream), my arms

spinning around me as I talk quickly and without a pause, as I tend to do when I get nervous. Tom is positively enraptured at the storytelling, patting his son on the back at intervals as I talk.

“So tell me about . . . all of you,” I say, when I’ve run out of steam.

“Nettie is a marketing executive at MartinHoldsworth,” Tom says, proud as punch. “Runs a whole department.”

“And what about you, Patrick?” I ask.

“I run a bookkeeping business,” Patrick says. “It’s small now, but we’ll expand with time.”

“So tell me about your parents, Lucy,” Diana jumps in. “What do they do?”

“My dad was a professor of modern European History. Retired now. And my mother died of breast cancer.” It’s been seventeen years, so talking about it is uncomfortable rather than upsetting. Mostly the discomfort is for other people, who, upon hearing this news, have to figure out something to say.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tom says, his booming voice bringing a palpable steadiness to the room.

“I lost my own mother a few years back,” Patrick says. “You never get over it.”

“You never do,” I agree, feeling a sudden kinship with Patrick. “But to answer your question, Diana, my mum was a stay-at-home mother. And before that, a primary schoolteacher.”

I always feel proud to tell people she was a teacher. Since her death, countless people have told me what a wonderful teacher she was, how she would have done anything for her students. It seems a waste that she never went back to it, even after I started school myself.

“Why bother having a child, if you’re not going to stick around

and enjoy her?” she used to say, which is kind of funny since she wasn’t able to stick around and enjoy me anyway, dying when I was thirteen.

“Her name was . . .” I start at the same time as Diana stands. We all stop talking and follow her with our eyes. For the first time, I understand the term *matriarch*, and the power of being one.

“Right then,” she says. “I think dinner will be ready, if everyone would like to move to the table.”

And with that, the conversation about my mother seems to be over.

We have roast lamb for dinner. Diana prepares and serves it herself. Given the size of their house I almost expected caterers to show up, but this part of the evening, at least, is comfortable and familiar.

“I was so impressed to hear about your charity,” I say, once Diana is finally sitting rather than serving. “Ollie is so proud of you, he talks about it to anyone who’ll listen.”

Diana smiles vaguely in my direction, reaching for the cauliflower cheese. “Does he?”

“You’d better believe it. I’d love to hear more about it.”

Diana spoons some cauliflower onto her plate, focusing intently on the transaction as if she were performing surgery. “Oh? What would you like to hear?”

“Well . . .” I feel under the spotlight suddenly. “I guess . . . what gave you the idea to start it? How did it get off the ground?”

Diana shrugs. “I just saw the need. It’s not rocket science, collecting baby goods.”

“She’s humble.” Tom pushes more lamb onto his fork, still

chewing what's in his mouth. He shoves the forkful into his mouth and keeps talking. "It's her Catholic upbringing."

"How did you two meet?" I ask, realizing that Ollie has never told me this.

"They met at the movies," Nettie says. "Dad saw Mum across the foyer and sparks flew."

Tom and Diana exchange a glance. There is affection in their gaze but something else too, something I can't quite place.

"What can I say? I knew right away that she was the one. Diana wasn't like anyone else that I knew. She was . . . smarter. More interesting. Out of my league, I thought."

"Mum came from a well-to-do family," Nettie explains. "Middle class, Catholic. Dad was a country boy, no connections, no money. Nothing but the shirt on his back."

I take a moment to undo the unconscious conclusion I'd come to the moment I walked into the house—that Diana had married Tom for his money. It's a sexist thought, but not a ridiculous conclusion to come to, seeing the disparity in their looks. The fact that she'd married him for love raises Diana a few notches in my opinion.

"And how about you, Diana," I ask. "Did you just know?"

"Course she did!" Tom says, framing his face in his hands. "How could you not, seeing this face?"

Everyone laughs.

"Actually I've been trying to tell him I'm not interested for nearly forty years but he just keeps speaking over the top of me," Diana says wryly. She and Tom exchange a smile.

After her earlier formality, it's nice to see this side of her. I allow myself to hope that once we've spent some more time together, she'll

let me into this inner sanctum of hers. Maybe one day I'll even start helping her with her charity? Diana might not be the easiest nut to crack, but I'll get there. Before long, we're sure to be the best of friends.

I was thirteen when my mother, Joy, died. Mum was aptly named—always having fun, never taking herself too seriously. She wore kerchiefs and dangly earrings, and she sang loudly in the car when the radio played a song she liked. At my birthday parties, she came in fancy dress, even though none of the other adults did, and she had a pair of tap shoes that she liked to wear from time to time, even though she'd never learned how to tap.

That was the kind of person my mother was.

The only time I saw Mum dress in black—without so much as a headband or wiglet or adornment—was when she attended a conference or dinner with Dad. Dad is the polar opposite of Mum—conservative, serious, gentle. The only time Mum reined in her personality, in fact, was for Dad. When Dad decided to switch tenures midway through his academic career—something tricky and likely to undermine his career and our livelihood—she supported him without question. “Dad’s job is to look after us, our job is to look after him.”

Dad never recovered after she died. Apparently statistics indicate that most men remarry within three years of a previous relationship ending, but twenty years on, Dad is still happily single. *Your mother was my life partner*, he always says, *and a life partner is for life.*

Dad hired a housekeeper after Mum died, to cook and clean and shop for us. Maria was probably fifty, but with her black hair flecked with grey and rolled into a coil she may as well have been a hun-

dred. She wore skirts and pantyhose and low-heeled court shoes, and floral aprons she sewed herself. Her own children were grown and the grandchildren hadn't shown up yet. She came from twelve noon until six P.M. every day. I don't know what Maria's official role was insofar as I was concerned, but she was always there when I got home from school and it seemed like it was the best part of her day. It was the best part of my day too. She'd empty my bag and rinse out my lunchboxes and chop up fruit and cheese on a plate for my afternoon tea—things Mum wouldn't have done in a blind fit. With hindsight, some may have felt smothered by Maria.

I simply felt mothered.

Once, when I had the flu, Maria came for the whole day. She pottered around, checking on me periodically, bringing me water or tea or a cool cloth for my forehead. A couple of times, when I was dozing and heard her enter the room, I'd let out a little moan, just to hear Maria fussing. She'd kiss my forehead and bring me water. She even fed me soup with a spoon.

It was, hand on heart, one of the best days of my life.

Maria left when I turned eighteen. She'd had her first grandchild by then, as well as an aging dog with glaucoma, and besides, I was nearly grown so there wasn't much for her to do anymore. After that, Dad got a regular cleaner, and started doing his grocery shopping on his way home from work. Maria kept in touch with birthday gifts and Christmas cards, but eventually her life got filled up with her own family. And that's when I realized. I needed *my own* family. A husband, some children, an old blind dog. Most importantly, I needed a Maria. Someone to share recipes, to give wisdom, and to drown me in waves of maternal love. Someone who wouldn't leave and go back to her own family because I *was* her family.

I didn't have a mother anymore. But one day, perhaps, I'd have a mother-in-law.

After dinner, Tom tells us to go hang out in the "den," which is a room with soaring cathedral ceilings and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and masses of leather. It reminds me of a gentlemen's club. It has an enormous TV that rises up out of a buffet, as well as an actual bar, loaded with spirits. Ollie has been called into the kitchen to help with coffee and dessert (which I assume means they want to debrief about me) so I am kicking it in the gentlemen's club with Nettie and Patrick.

"So," Patrick says, from the bar. He is making us some sort of cocktail, which I don't need because I've already had two glasses of wine, but he seems so happy messing about with all the spirits that I don't have the heart to tell him. "What do you think of Diana?"

"Patrick," Nettie warns.

"What?" A smile curls at the corners of his mouth. "It isn't a trick question."

I scramble pathetically for something to say but honestly, there isn't much. Diana spent most of dinner intermittently asking if anyone wanted any more vegetables. She deflected any questions I asked her, and apart from her little chuckle about her first meeting with Tom, she remained frustratingly distant all evening. Honestly, if it hadn't been for Tom and Nettie and Patrick, it wouldn't have felt like a social function at all. All I know is that Diana is nothing like I was hoping.

"Well . . . I think she . . . is . . ." I roll several words around in my mouth—*nice*, *interesting*, *kind*—but none feel right and I don't

want to be insincere. I am, after all, not just here to impress the parents. If things work out between Ollie and me, I'll be spending alternate Christmases with Nettie and Patrick for the rest of my life . . . so it is important to be real. Problem is, it is too early to be *really* real. Meeting the family, I realize, requires you to be a politician. You need to know where to throw your support at what time to yield maximum results. I decide to do as my mother always told me and find something true to say.

"I think she is a wonderful cook."

Patrick laughs a little too heartily. Nettie looks daggers at him.

"Oh come on, Nets." Patrick gives her a poke in the ribs. "Listen, she could be worse. At least we have Tom, right?"

It's cold comfort. I'd had such a distilled picture of what I wanted in a potential mother-in-law—no father-in-law, not even Tom, could take its place. Patrick, on the other hand, seems to have accepted his frosty mother-in-law without too much concern, despite the fact that she clearly isn't his cup of tea either.

"Well," I say after a few minutes, when Ollie has still not showed his face and I get the feeling Nettie wants a moment alone with Patrick. "I might go see how dessert is coming along."

I walk through double doors into the great room that feeds into a wide kitchen, centered on a huge granite island. Ollie and Diana are at the island with their backs to me, and appear to be arranging items onto a cheese board.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Diana is saying.

"It matters to me," Ollie says.

"Well it shouldn't." Diana enunciates her words like a librarian or piano teacher, crisply and properly, not in the least uncertain. I pause in the doorway.

“Are you saying you *don't* like her?”

Diana pauses for far too long. “I’m saying it doesn’t *matter* what I think.”

I pull back, out of sight, tucking myself around the corner. I feel as though I’ve been sucker punched. Of all the worries I’d had—that she wasn’t the mother-in-law I’d wanted, that she didn’t live up to my expectations—I hadn’t, narcissistically as it turns out, considered that she wouldn’t like me.

“Seriously, Mum? You’re not going to tell me what you think of Lucy?”

“Oh, Ollie!” I picture her shaking her hand like she’s swatting a fly. “I think she’s *fine*.”

Fine. I take a moment to digest that. I’m *fine*.

I search for an upside to *fine*, but I can’t seem to find one. Being called *fine* is like being told your outfit doesn’t make you look fat. Being called *fine* is like being the day-old sandwich that doesn’t give you food poisoning. Being called *fine* is like being the daughter-in-law that you didn’t want, but who could have, on balance, been worse.

“There you are, Lucy!”

I whirl around. Tom is at the mouth of the hallway, beaming. “Come and help me choose some dessert wine. I never know which one to go for.”

“Oh, I don’t really know much about w—”

But Tom is already dragging me down to a cellar with an astonishing array of wines. I fake my way through a dessert wine tasting session, grateful for the dark to hide the tears that I blink back.

To me, *fine* is as good as dead.