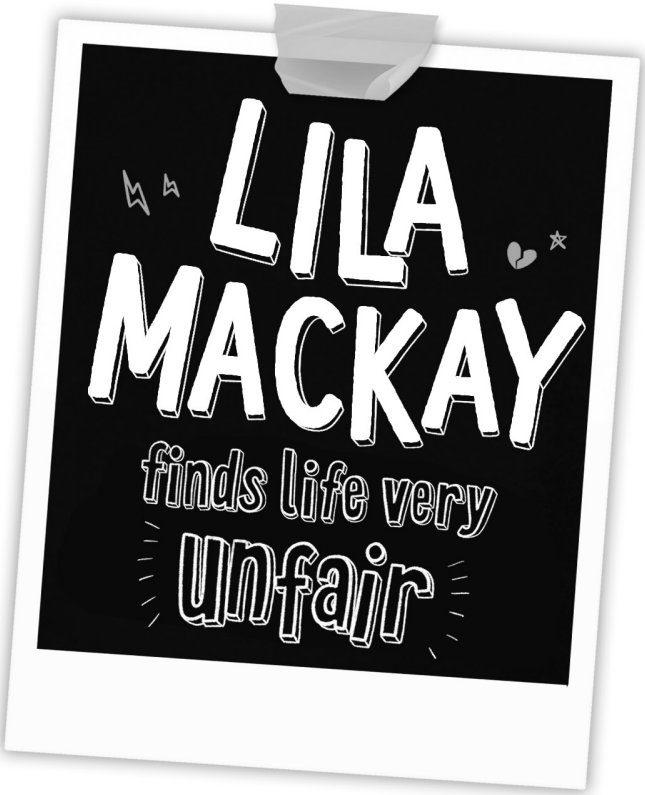




LILA
MACKAY

finds life very
unfair



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GILL SIMS





EMILY

CHAPTER ONE

I think Mum has been watching those cringe psychology TikToks about parenting and how to talk to teenagers. Poppy said she dreads getting in the car with her mum now, after her mum saw one that recommended using car journeys as the perfect opportunity to have difficult conversations with your teenager. Every time, even just if it's a lift to the station, Poppy's mum puts on a special 'caring' voice and asks Poppy if there's anything she wants to talk about, which makes Poppy just want to open the car door and jump out. Unfortunately, when Poppy said this to her mum, her mum got even more worried about Poppy and her teenage mental health and watched more TikToks on how to 'help' her. So now Poppy gets the bus to the station, so she doesn't have to talk about her feelings.

So far, Mum has spared me this, possibly because she doesn't really understand TikTok (she still insists on referring to it as 'the TikTok', even though I have told her

repeatedly that calling it ‘the TikTok’ is *literally* the most boomer thing anyone could do – I suspect she is now doing it just to annoy me), but as we turned on to the motorway on our way to Dad’s house, she cleared her throat in the way she does before she says anything serious, and then said, in a funny way that made me see what Poppy meant about her mum’s special ‘caring’ voice, ‘Emily, darling, you know you can talk to me about anything?’

I just grunted, and concentrated on staring at my phone, but Mum was not deterred and started explaining about how the car was a really good place to have these conversations because it was a neutral space and we didn’t have to look at each other, we could just talk, and I couldn’t bear it any longer.

‘I knew it!’ I burst out. ‘You *have* been watching those parenting psychology TikToks, haven’t you? Oh my God, it’s so *unfair*! Why are you even *on* TikTok? You have, like, your old people’s social media like Facebook and Instagram, why can’t we just have TikTok? You never let me have *anything* for myself!’

‘Old people’s social media?’ said Mum in outrage, though at least she was talking in her normal voice again. ‘They are not old people’s social media. Why would you even say that?’

‘Because they *are*,’ I pointed out. ‘*Literally* no one my

age uses them. Only you and your friends. And apparently that's not enough for you, because now you're taking TikTok too!'

'Why do you think I'm on TikTok?' Mum asked nervously.

'I *told* you. Because you're trying to do that "talk to them in the car" thing that the *old people* who are stealing TikTok from us are telling the other old saddos who are also invading our space to do. You know what this is? It's . . . it's *colonisation*,' I said in triumph. 'That's what it is. It's nothing more than *digital colonisation*. Dressed up as pop psychology, so you can embarrass your only daughter under the pretence of caring! You are the Christopher Columbus of TikTok! You are an *oppressor*.'

'I . . . what?' said Mum. 'I just asked if there was anything you wanted to talk about and now I'm some kind of colonial oppressor?'

'Yes. Because you're trying to steal our culture, and frankly, Mum, it's embarrassing,' I hissed. 'It's like that awful time you asked the security guard in the shopping centre where the skibidi toilet was.'

'I thought it was what the kids call the loo nowadays,' Mum protested. 'I was trying to speak his language!'

I despair of my mother. I have explained to her many times that no one says things like that except, like, really

sad twelve-year-olds, and all Mum says is that the security guard had *looked* twelve anyway, so how was she to know?

None of this was helping my problem, though, as Mum was still determined to 'talk about things' with me, even though she claims she saw the car psychology video on Instagram, not TikTok. In fairness, she is probably telling the truth, because I have seen her trying to work TikTok, and sometimes I think it's no wonder she calls it 'the TikTok' because it is genuinely mortifying watching her. But as long as I kept arguing with her about it, I thought I might stand some chance of distracting her from the actual issue at hand that I knew she was dying to discuss.

I should have known better. My mother may not get TikTok, but she is tenacious.

I slumped in my seat and stared at my phone some more as Mum chuntered that I would make myself carsick, 'like that time you threw up blue icing all over the car after Erin's fourth birthday party because you'd raided the party bags while everyone was playing What's the Time, Mr Wolf? and eaten the icing off all the cake.'

Yes, Mum, I was *three*. I'm nearly fifteen now, do we keep having to bringing that up? Still, if I pretended I was feeling sick, then maybe Mum would let things drop and we could spend the rest of the drive to Dad's house in a vaguely companionable silence. Before I could give a

sufficiently pathetic, nauseous groan, though, Mum had started again.

‘Look, Emily, I know you’re hurting, and you say you don’t want to talk about it, but I think it would help. You think you’re escaping things by running away to your dad’s, but you can’t ignore what’s happened – you have to work through it. And that’s what I’m here for.’

‘Mum!’

‘Emily, I know this is hard, your first break-up, your first heartbreak –’

‘Great, Mum, thanks, just keep reminding me – Emily got dumped!’ I snarled. ‘Thanks a lot! And FYI, I am *not* heartbroken, I am TOTALLY OVER HIM! Literally could not care less. He saved me the trouble of dumping him, actually.’

‘Emily –’

I stuck my headphones in and turned the music up, before Mum could attempt any more emotional bonding. I did not need this. Not right now. What I needed was to try and convince the world that I am completely over Oli Letby, that he means nothing to me, that he *meant* nothing to me. That all we had was a casual situationship, and that I am completely *fine* with it coming to an end.

Of course, I am not. I am shaken, hurt, shocked and humiliated. I thought he cared about me. I thought this

was *it*. I thought we were going to be together forever – or at least until the end of school. But we didn't even make it to the end of the summer disco.

With hindsight, I should've seen it coming. Oli had been a bit weird for a few days. He's in the year above me, so during the week I only saw him at break and lunch, because Mum won't let me go out on a school night (so unfair). When we first started going out, he would be waiting for me, or looking for me when I came out of class. But towards the end of term, I started having to look for *him*. Then, he'd be hanging out with his friends instead of me, and I'd almost feel like I was intruding, or annoying him by being there. I told myself I was imagining it, I was his *girlfriend*, of course he'd want me to be there, why *wouldn't* he?

And then, it was the end of term summer disco. I'd hoped he'd offer to pick me up, or at least meet me first, so we could go together. I'd had vague ideas about him bringing me flowers, like in the films before they go to Prom, even though this wasn't a prom, just a summer disco, because we don't get a prom until Year 12. Mum develops an eye twitch every time someone mentions Prom, and goes off on a rant about how it's a DANCE, not a prom, that a prom is a ghastly Americanisation and entirely unnecessary and we are not the fifty-first

state yet, and then she complains for a while about Starbucks too, though I can't really see what that has to do with Prom. Anyway, all such hopes were dashed when Oli just mumbled something after school about how he'd maybe see me at the disco, and then got on his bus, like nothing special was happening at all!

I had turned down Poppy's invitation to come and get ready at her house, so sure was I that I'd be going to the disco with Oli, but Poppy was standing there beside me when Oli said he'd 'see me there' and she's such a good friend she didn't even make a big deal about it and say, 'Well, sucks to be you, loser,' or any of the other things she could've said, given I had picked Oli over her (and more than once this term, I have to admit, to my shame). Instead, she just said, 'Hey, I don't suppose you've changed your mind about coming over to get ready, have you?' so I was able to totally casually just pretend that actually, yeah, that would be great.

We got to the disco and Oli was even weirder. Every time I sat down next to him, he made some excuse and disappeared. He was going to get a drink, or he needed the loo, or he just had to talk to someone quickly.

Eventually, towards the end of the night, Mr Bryant, the geography teacher slash DJ for the evening, put on some slower music and people started dancing together.

I looked hopefully at Oli. He sort of winced and then he said, 'Emily, we need to talk.'

I felt like I was in a lift plummeting at high speed and I'd left my tummy several floors above. *Everyone* knows no good can come from someone saying that to you. No one says, 'We need to talk,' before declaring their undying love, or announcing they're giving you a million pounds or getting you a puppy. 'We need to talk' could only mean one thing, so at least I had about forty-five seconds to compose myself as Oli shuffled his feet and said, 'Maybe we could go outside?'

I tried to tell myself that I was wrong. If he wanted to go outside, perhaps it was just so he could kiss me in the summer moonlight, and he wanted to talk about – oh, I don't know, my advice about his A-level choices or something. But I still had the horrible whooshing left-behind tummy feeling and I knew deep down what was coming.

I wish I'd trusted my instincts, and when we went outside, instead of looking at him, all big pathetic pleading eyes, hoping desperately that he wasn't going to say what I thought he was, I had just casually turned to him on the steps of the school hall and said, 'Actually, Oli, I don't think this is working, I don't want to see you any more,' and then at least *I* would have dumped *him*. I would still feel

horrible, obviously, but I would have retained some dignity and control over the situation and felt like at least I'd been a good feminist and not a feeble little tool of the patriarchy.

Instead, I smiled at him like nothing was wrong and this was a totally normal way for him to behave at the summer disco, as he shuffled some more and then blurted, 'I don't think we should see each other any more!'

I couldn't stop myself. Before I even really knew what I was saying, I had whined, 'But *why?*', losing the last opportunity to play it cool and pretend I didn't care.

'Well, because, you know, this was only ever going to be, like, a situationship?' Oli muttered. 'Wasn't it? It couldn't be anything else.'

'Why not?' I was fighting back tears.

'Emily, please don't make this harder than it has to be,' Oli pleaded, like I was the one doing something hurtful to him.

'I'm not,' I sniffed. 'I just . . . I don't understand.'

'Well, it's obvious, isn't it?' he said. 'I'm going to be sixteen in a few weeks. And once I'm sixteen, I'll want someone who . . . well, you're not even *fifteen* yet, are you? And, like, that's not even legal, is it? I want to be a doctor, I can't get in trouble for something like that, can I?' Oli put on a very brave and martyred expression.

I gulped. 'Are you saying . . . that you want . . . ?'

‘Someone with a bit more . . . maturity,’ he said. ‘Yes. Someone who can . . . you know.’

‘Sex,’ I said flatly. ‘You’re dumping me because you want someone old enough to have sex with, aren’t you?’

‘It sounds *bad* when you put it like that,’ complained Oli, ‘but, well, yes, sort of. I’m nearly old enough, I deserve to have that, don’t I?’ He did the brave, martyred face again.

‘No one *deserves* it. It’s not some *human right*!’ I chuntered. ‘Not unless you’re some awful toxic masculinity sort of person!’

Oli was indignant as he went on to explain that, really, he was one of the good guys, that he was doing this *for me*, that he was *only thinking about me*, because he cared about me.

‘If you *cared* about me,’ I said bitterly, all attempts to keep the tears back failing as I wiped my nose with the back of my hand in a very unattractive way, ‘you’d wait till I was old enough, and I was ready, instead of just *thinking with your trousers*.’

‘That’s very unfair,’ Oli huffed. ‘I told you, I’m thinking about *you*. But if anything, you’re proving my point by being so immature now! You’ll understand when you’re older.’

‘Whatever.’ I wiped my nose again and turned my back on him to walk away with as much dignity as possible when you’ve just been dumped because, now your alleged boyfriend is going to be the grand old age of sixteen,

he deserves so much more from a girl.

Once I was out of sight and earshot of the school hall, I gave into proper howls of woe. I texted Poppy, asking her to get my things and come and meet me, while I wept and wept, becoming more and more soddenly snotty, until Poppy appeared with my bag, which luckily had a packet of tissues in it. She mopped me up and hugged me while I gulped and sniffled some more, and then when I tried to explain, she said, 'It's OK, Emily. I think I can guess. He dumped you, didn't he?'

I nodded sadly.

'Alexa Neville said he was going to.' Poppy invoked the name of our arch-nemesis, the blonde, popular, utter *bitch* that was Alexa Neville.

I was aghast. Poppy had *known* this was going to happen? I wasn't sure what was worse: that Poppy had known before me, or that Alexa had.

Poppy quickly assured me that no, she'd had no idea, until Alexa saw Oli and I going outside together and had wasted no time in informing everyone that Oli Letby was off to dump Emily Osbourne because she was too immature for him and didn't put out. And, according to Alexa, after he'd chucked me he was going to get together with Grace Walker in his year, who apparently had all the 'maturity' I was lacking.

I burst into tears again, and then had to pull myself together when Mum rang to say she was in the car park to pick us up, and where were we?

I think it must have been quite obvious to Mum what had happened when she saw my tear-stained face, because she didn't ask where Oli was, even though we were supposed to be giving him a lift home too. Let him walk, I thought crossly, and then nearly started crying again in the car as I thought that soon enough he would be Walkering. It wasn't even a good pun. I was too upset for puns. Mum also tactfully didn't say anything to me while Poppy was in the car, but once we'd dropped Poppy at her house and we were home, she did try the 'Would you like to talk to me?' approach but I just told her I was tired and thought maybe I was coming down with something and that I wanted to go to bed. Luckily she didn't argue.

I was so relieved that at least the disco had marked the end of term and the school year, so I didn't have to go to school and face everyone the next day, but there was still a whole summer to get through, with every chance of bumping into Oli and Grace and the vile and hateful Alexa, who'd definitely get in some little dig at me whenever she could.

If I could just vanish for the summer and reappear in the autumn, I thought, maybe everyone would have forgotten

that I was the girl who got dumped at the summer disco. Maybe, even, I thought hopefully, if he had a bit of time without me, Oli would realise he'd made a mistake, that Grace was shallow and mean and I was worth a million of her (I had no idea what Grace was actually like, I had never spoken to her, she might have been a saint who spent her spare time rescuing orphaned kittens for all I knew, but I preferred my version of her). Then, when we went back to school, Oli would fall dramatically to his knees in the corridor, *in front of everyone* (especially Grace and Alexa), and beg me pitifully to take him back.

Ha. There was a scenario. Would I take him back? Or would I say something cutting and scornful and make as big a fool of him as he had of me? That was what I *should* do, I thought. That was what a good feminist would do. But maybe he would have changed and I would smile kindly on him and he would sweep me into his arms and kiss me there and then and we would live happily ever after. (Except if Mr Stevenson the head caught us snogging in the corridors, it would be detention for us both, not a happy ever after.)

But first I had to enact stage one of my plan: Operation Stay With Dad for the Summer.

Mum and Dad both capitulated to my request with less objection than I'd been expecting. I was quite insulted,

actually, at how easily Mum gave in and said, ‘Yes, of course, Emily, if that’s what you want, I’ll ring him now and see what he says.’ I do think she might have looked a *bit* woebegone and sorrowful that her only daughter would be spending the summer a hundred miles away. But no, she came off the phone to Dad positively *beaming* and just said, ‘Well, this has worked out perfectly. I can spend time working on the edits to my novel without worrying about you being bored, and Dad’s thrilled – he says you can come to the university and help him; it will be good work experience and something to put on your UCAS form!’

What? No. That wasn’t part of the plan! I didn’t want to help Dad in his boring office with his boring job all summer. First, I wanted to pine in an emotionally dramatic manner, and then, maybe, when I was looking suitably grief-stricken and interesting, some handsome boy would see me and fall hopelessly in love with me, and pursue me in a romantic but non-creepy or stalkery way, even though my heart was broken and I could never love another, but still, it would be nice to have some validation that I am lovable and do not repulse men. How was that supposed to happen if I was stuck at Dad’s work, no doubt given some incredibly tedious task that Dad would pretend was vital and important, but really, no one else wanted to do? (Dad is a lecturer in archaeology and that is not as interesting as

it sounds, because as far as I can see, his job involves not Indiana Jones-style adventures, but an awful lot of boring paperwork.)

I did object to this plan, but Mum just said briskly that everything was arranged now, she was sure I'd have fun once I was there, that the change would be good for me, and she'd arranged to drive me over on Sunday.

So that is how I ended up en route to a summer of being a general dogsbody, with probably no time to think about how sad and lonely I am. I told Mum I wanted time to 'think about things' at Dad's and I didn't feel like that was going to happen if I was always working, and Mum just said, 'There will plenty of time to think about anything at all, but if you have nothing to do all summer, you'll end up *over* thinking, and dwelling on things, and that is not healthy.'

Which is proof, if any was needed, that Mum has no idea what I am going through.



When we got to Dad's house, Mum and Dad were both very jolly and jovial, but when I was coming back from the loo, I heard her say very quietly to Dad, 'I just don't know how to get through to her, Andrew. Perhaps you'll have more luck,' and Dad spluttering, 'How I am supposed to

know what to say to her about stuff like this?’

Great, so now Mum has told Dad what happened, and he will probably also watch TikTok videos about talking to your teenager, and then I’ll get the special ‘caring’ voice from him too! It’s so unfair; all I wanted to do was come here to lick my wounds in peace.

We waved goodbye to Mum, and Dad immediately turned to me and did the Voice, saying, ‘Emily, you know you can talk to me about –’

‘I need to unpack!’ I said quickly, and stomped upstairs to my room.

At the top of my bag I found a small package and a note from Mum.

Darling Emily,

I know right now you are heartbroken and think everything is very unfair and life will never be the same again. And yes, in some ways that’s true: you will be older and wiser and stronger after this. And I know that sounds unlikely, because at the moment you feel like this is something you will never get over, but I promise, you will. As the old saying goes, ‘This too shall pass.’

I remember it helped you to read my old diary a few months ago, when you felt no one understood what you were going through, and then you realised that maybe

you were not the only person to struggle with first love. Well, you are not the first person to have their heart broken either, and I thought that perhaps you would like to read my diary from the first time it happened to me? It's here if you want it. I'm here whenever you want to talk too, or if you want to come home – all you have to do is pick up your phone (like you ever put it down 😊).

All love, always,

Mum xxxx

I opened the package. Sure enough, it contained not a stack of H&M gift cards to cheer me up with retail therapy, but a small, battered book, the cover smothered in stickers and doodles, and the pages inside crammed with loopy teenage writing, so different from Mum's hurried adult scrawl. Mum's diary. Well, *Lila's diary*, as the cover proclaimed, along with *PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL*.

Lila again.

I still found it almost impossible to equate my mother with the sparky teenage girl in the pages of the diary Uncle Tom had given me to read last Easter. *That* Lila had become a friend, in some weird way. And now she was back, and she'd had her heart broken too. Did I want to know what

happened? What if she wasn't the fun, silly Lila any more, but already someone more like Mum?

I had lost Oli. Was I willing to risk losing Lila too?

I was still trying to decide what to do, when Dad shouted up the stairs that dinner was ready. Dad's cooking is not a patch on Mum's, but I thought I'd better appreciate it while I could because his food is a million times better than his girlfriend Stella's.

Stella is a vegan, but I don't think that's anything to do with why it's so awful. I've had plenty of yummy vegan food, just none of it cooked by Stella. Unfortunately, whenever Stella is at Dad's, which is quite a lot, as she has been hinting very unsubtly about moving in ever since they got together, she insists on cooking, because she is under the impression her food is a) healthy and b) edible. It is neither.

Since Stella was currently on a holistic yoga retreat in the Lake District, Dad had made us cheesy pasta. He was very pleased with himself, saying, 'I've made your favourite, Emily,' and I was so relieved about NOT having to eat Stella's lentil bake that I didn't have the heart to tell him that cheesy pasta hadn't actually been my favourite since I was about five.

Alas, Dad did the whole, 'Emily, darling, do you want to talk?' thing again, which sort of spoiled the pasta.

I thought it was a good opportunity to tackle a subject I *was* keen to discuss, though, and so I twirled my spaghetti (Dad did not seem to realise that cheesy pasta is supposed to be made with penne, in his opinion ‘pasta is pasta’) round my fork, did my best innocent face and said, ‘Well, now you mention it, there is something I’d like to talk about . . .’

Dad choked slightly on a bit of rocket from the token salad he had dumped out of a bag into a bowl so he could tell Mum and Stella that we had been eating vegetables, and once he’d finished spluttering and coughing, he carefully rearranged his face into that of a concerned father rather than one startled that his teenage daughter was actually going to discuss her *feelings* with him.

‘Of course, darling, you can talk to me about anything,’ he gulped miserably, taking a slug of wine to give him some Dutch courage for whatever horror I was about to unleash on him.

‘Can I have a glass of wine?’ I asked hopefully.

Dad perked up in the hope that this was my Big Topic for discussion, and said, ‘No, you’re only fourteen.’

‘Nearly fifteen,’ I argued. ‘In France –’

‘We aren’t in France, Emily, we’re in Surrey,’ Dad pointed out. ‘Was that what you wanted to talk about?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I wanted to know if you’re going to marry Stella?’

Poor Dad choked again. This time, I was a bit worried he might be a goner. Finally, he gasped, 'Why do you ask that?'

'I was just wondering.' I had a forkful of cheesy pasta. It wasn't bad, actually. 'She's here a lot. That means it's serious, doesn't it? I've met her. I don't usually meet your girlfriends. So are you going to get married?'

'God, NO!' said Dad, before he could stop himself. 'I mean, um, it's complicated.'

'How?' I demanded. 'Are you just using her for sex? That's so misogynistic, Dad, you should be ashamed of yourself!' MEN, I thought in disgust. They were all the same.

Dad spluttered some more as he said, 'It's complicated,' again, before finishing up with how I was too young to understand and I'd get what he was saying when I was older.

I rolled my eyes at this patronising remark and shouted, 'Why does everyone say that to me? I'm NEARLY FIFTEEN! I understand plenty of things RIGHT NOW! It is SO UNFAIR that everyone treats me like a BABY!' And I flung my plate in the dishwasher and stormed off to my room.

I threw myself down on my bed and reached for my phone to pour out my woes to Poppy, but realised to my

fury that I'd left it in the kitchen, and would have to go back down to get it. At the top of the stairs, I heard Dad on the phone to someone, talking very quietly in that stupid 'caring' voice, and I realised the person at the other end was Mum when I heard him say, 'Yes, I see what you mean, Lila, she is at a very difficult stage. Well, I'll do what I can, of course, but if you can't get through to her, I don't see what difference I will make. Perhaps I should get Stella to talk to her? What? Well, Stella's a woman, isn't she, she might be better at this sort of thing than me? OK, Lila, OK, there's no need to be like that about it. I just thought another female perspective . . . ! No, fine, I won't get Stella to talk to her, if you think it's a terrible idea. Actually, talking of Stella, she's calling me now, I'd better go. Yes, I'll let you know how I get on. Bye, bye. Stella! Hello, darling! Yes, she's here. Mmmm, she's being a bit tricky, to be honest with you. I think –'

I couldn't bear to hear any more about what Dad thought, or even worse, what Stella thought. My phone would have to wait. I couldn't go down there while they were all discussing me and how *difficult* I was. They would be *difficult* too, if they'd had their hearts broken like me.

I flopped down on the bed and wondered what to do until Dad finished talking to Stella and I could go and get my phone. My eye fell on Mum's package – *Lila's diary*.

I bet Lila would understand heartbreak and sorrow. And I did feel a pang of gratitude to Mum for intervening in Dad's appalling idea to get Stella to talk to me.

I sighed and picked up the diary.

It wasn't like I had anything else to do.