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LILA MACKAY is very misunderstood

GILL SIMS





EMILY

CHAPTER ONE

My mother hates me. I have spent some time trying to work out what has happened to me, and how my life has gone so very wrong, and that is the only conclusion I can come to. I am only fourteen years old, and my mother hates me. She must hate me, because why else would MY OWN MOTHER purposely, selfishly, *cruelly* set out to ruin the life of her only daughter, other than because she hates me and she ONLY THINKS OF HERSELF.

On the first day of the Easter holidays, I should be at Poppy's house, making get-ready-with-me TikToks. If we were at my house, Mum would be there, and she'd ask what were we getting ready for, we're only going to the park? But at the park is Toby Cooper who I am sure is JUST ABOUT to ask me out, and that is why I must be ready at all times, because the first time the love of your life talks to you is a really important moment that I will remember forever. If I was old and sad like Mum,

I would probably say it is totally #memories.

Of course, Mum doesn't understand about that, which is hardly surprising because she doesn't understand anything. If she knew about Toby, she'd be all, 'You're too young to think about things like that, don't waste your time on boys, you can't possibly be in love.' I don't think Mum has ever been in love, so how would she even know whether I'm in love with Toby or not (I definitely am, though).

But now, instead of being in Poppy's bedroom pooling our MAC collection, with TayTay on repeat, so I look my best before Toby sweeps me off my feet and everyone thinks I am the coolest girl in our year for dating Toby Cooper, who is the best-looking boy in our year, I am destined for the CRUELLEST OF CRUEL SUMMERS!

Well, technically it's the Easter holidays, but it is quite warm today, and Taylor Swift hasn't written a song called 'Cruel Easter Holidays'.

I am en route to my destiny, away from Poppy, away from Toby, away from all that brings hope and joy to life, by way of a train, where there is a woman sitting opposite me on her phone watching recipe videos with no headphones on and laughing loudly, for reasons that escape me – why is macaroni cheese so funny? There is a man reading the *Sun* on his tablet sitting next to me, and another woman

across the aisle playing what sounds like *Candy Crush* which I didn't even realise was still a thing, and an annoying child behind me, kicking the seat every ten seconds, watching *Paw Patrol,* and the whole carriage is filled with people enjoying lovely, beeping, dinging, singing, mind-rotting electronics courtesy of the train's free Wi-Fi – all of them . . .

Except me. I have nothing to do but stare hopelessly out of the window as the train hurtles me further and further north, away to the bleak moors of Emily Brontë and far from all I have ever known. It will serve my mother right if, instead of Toby, I take up with a dark and brooding Heathcliff sort I meet on the moor and run off with him and die of the consumption after getting my feet wet and forgetting my shawl.

I said all of this to Mum (apart from telling her about Toby) as she put me on the train, and she gave me an unsympathetic look, and said that I had no one to blame but myself since I had left my iPad at Dad's house, and I was the one who had smashed my phone.

I didn't *mean* to smash my phone. The way Mum said it sounded like I'd taken a hammer to it in a fit of rage, rather than what had actually happened, which was that I'd dropped it down the stairs last night when I was trying to snap Poppy at the same time as bringing down all the dishes in my room because Mum

said I was a disgusting skank and also that she had no crockery left. Harsh. And *that* was when I realised I had left the iPad at Dad's when I had been there the night before to say goodbye before I was cast adrift into the wilderness because my own parents don't want me. Like a Victorian orphan.

Maybe I'm more Jane Eyre than Cathy Earnshaw. Maybe I will marry a massive red flag like Mr Rochester, and *then* Mum will be sorry. And Dad. But mostly Mum, because all of this is *her* fault for deciding she wanted to go on a residential writing course to finish the novel she claims to have been working on for years. According to her, it is her 'dream' to get it published. And it's all very well, her chasing her dreams, but what about me, her only daughter, while she does that?

What about me, indeed?

I was quite excited at first when Mum told me she'd had a last-minute offer to go on the course. I am such a kind and loving daughter that before I realised Mum hated me, I was really happy for her, because she said it meant a lot to her, and she would love to actually finish this novel instead of writing dozens of poorly paid articles about top cleaning tips and mystery shopping reviews and 'stealing her style'. The course was paid for by some old dead millionaire who wanted to further the cause of women's fiction (personally

I could think of better things to do with my money if I was a millionaire but each to their own). Mum could never have afforded something like this herself.

I was happy for me too, because I thought it meant I would get to have that time at home all by myself, being grown-up and having parties and sleepovers and doing whatever I wanted all day, and I would find some way to just casually mention this in Toby's hearing and he would think I was really mature and sophisticated and how could he possibly resist that?! But Mum had other ideas.

Initially, she said I could go and stay with Dad, but that didn't work because Dad is spending the Easter break on an archaeological dig with some of his students (including his new girlfriend, which I Do Not Approve Of) in a desert somewhere, and the site does not allow under eighteens, and even though I said I could clearly pass for eighteen even though I'm only fourteen, everyone agreed that I couldn't go with him and sit around in a hotel all day by myself.

I offered again to stay at home on my own. I looked very noble, and slightly pained, as I suggested that it would be a sacrifice I was willing to make, but Mum told me not to be so silly, and then asked me if I had a stomach ache as I looked very peculiar. It is not my fault she can't recognise Noble Suffering when she sees it! Mum was looking fairly Nobly Suffering herself, and saying she'd have to turn

down the course, because so many people were also away over Easter, when she came up with a brainwave, and rang Uncle Tom to see if he would mind having me while she was away.

I was pretty sure he would say, 'Absolutely not' – asking someone to look after your child for the holidays when you are not a feckless parental character in an old children's book is a fairly big ask of anyone – but to my astonishment, he said yes! Uncle Tom has been 'dabbling', as he puts it, in property developing since he split up with his husband. He has just bought another house that he is doing up, and he said I could make myself useful while I was there, helping him decorate and get the house straight, and why didn't Mum come and spend a few days after she finished the course too?

Once I got over the initial surprise, and some horror, I didn't *hate* the idea. I thought maybe I could start a house reno TikTok and go viral as the youngest interiors inspo account in the UK. I had plans to tie fetching scarves around my hair and show people how to create quirky original yet affordable looks for their room. But that was before it all went horribly wrong and I forgot my iPad and broke my phone.

I had been quite hysterical at Mum about what was I supposed to *do* without a phone ALL HOLIDAYS as she

very unreasonably refused to replace it, or even to pay to have it repaired, insisting that she was always telling me to be more careful with my things. Her solution was to point out I could get my iPad back from Dad in a couple of weeks and to give me an old Nokia phone she had in a drawer – one with *buttons*, ugh! And no data. I demanded to know what use this would be, and she said I could ring people on it. Actually make *calls*, like I'm some sort of *animal*. And when I said what am I supposed to do the rest of the time, when I'm not talking on the phone like it's 1850, Mum said that Alexander Graham Bell didn't invent the telephone until 1876, LIKE I EVEN CARE when phones were invented. I tried to send a text with it, and it was impossible. I don't think Poppy even *gets* texts anyway. She certainly hasn't replied and this phone is so old and hideous that it doesn't even have old people messaging apps like WhatsApp. I never thought I'd see the day I would feel grateful for WhatsApp. Mum suggested I could write letters to people, and when I asked how I would send them, if Uncle Tom would be providing me with carrier pigeons or something, she laughed and said there was such a thing as the Royal Mail, and people would probably love to get some proper letters.

I don't think my friends would even know what to do with a letter. I would be highly suspicious if I got a letter.

Mum claims that when she was young, you had penpals in other countries and you wrote to each other about your lives and sometimes you met up or went to stay with them, and frankly that just sounds like grooming and Stranger Danger to me. How on earth can Mum lecture me with a straight face about not talking to strangers on Snapchat when she was off writing to Jean Michel and oooh-la-laing over his stamps?

But I had three hours to kill on this train, so in the end, in despair, I tried to write a letter to Poppy. Mum said just think how useful my letters could be one day to my biographer if I end up famous for something. What could someone like me be famous for, though? I don't think a letter that only says 'Dear Poppy' would be very helpful to anyone, because that is as far as I got before I got stuck. What do you write in a letter? Aren't you supposed to be all 'Good morrow, kind sir, I trust this finds you not dead of the plague or other disgusting olden-day poxes, I have sent to my cousin in the country for some apples forsooth'. What interest would Poppy have in that? Snapping is so much better than letter writing.

The Train of Doom finally pulled into Leeds, and Uncle Tom was there as promised to meet me. I had wondered what would happen if I didn't get off, but just carried on, and ran away to Darlington or somewhere and was never

heard of again, and no one could find me because they couldn't do Find My iPhone or Life360. I could change my name and get a job and live a double life. But what if I didn't like Darlington? And what sort of a job could I get, with no phone to apply, when I'm only fourteen, even if I lied about my age? Also, it occurred to me that Mum would probably blame Uncle Tom and this isn't really his fault, and I didn't want to get him into trouble.

Uncle Tom started telling me about the house as we drove there. It was quite a long drive. Mum had claimed that Uncle Tom lived in Leeds, but Uncle Tom laughed when I said this and told me that at best it could be called 'Leeds adjacent'. I had been envisaging Uncle Tom and I creating some sort of ultra cool urban living space, me popping out for fancy coffees, maybe going to some swanky shops that Poppy will not have heard of, and coming home looking completely different. I would probably BE completely different: mature and sophisticated and cultured after my sojourn in a big city, instead of our small provincial town. Toby Cooper would be bowled over by how grown-up and exotic I seemed, and would be unable to resist my charms. Maybe I wouldn't even fancy him any more – I'd find him too childish and foolish, and would want someone older, more on my wavelength. How was any of that going to happen though, in the 'Leeds adjacent'

ancient old rectory on the moors Uncle Tom was telling me about?

'Your mum thought you'd love it!' Uncle Tom said. 'It's very Brontë-esque and I believe *Wuthering Heights* is one of your favourite books?'

'I mean, yeah, I like *Wuthering Heights*,' I wailed. 'But I don't want to *live* in it.'

What I want is for someone to fall in love with me, as passionately, as hopelessly, as death-defyingly as Heathcliff loved Cathy. But I could hardly say that to Uncle Tom. And I definitely didn't want any of the other parts, like the lonely old house and the mad inhabitants. What if *I* went mad living there, before my life has even started? And I returned to Poppy and Toby wild-eyed and frizzy haired, fit only to be locked in the attic out of sight, what hope would there be for me then?

I did suggest this to Uncle Tom, who just laughed and said I was confusing my Brontës, that was *Jane Eyre* and the first Mrs Rochester I was thinking of, and he didn't think I could be driven to such extremis in the relatively short time I was staying with him.

'My hair could turn white,' I muttered gloomily. 'I will be squandering my youth, alone on the moors. What will become of me?'

Uncle Tom told me to stop being so dramatic and that

I never knew, I might have fun. I did know though, because when grown-ups say things like that, you are *definitely* not going to have any fun at all.