

Praise for *That's Just Perfect*

'I love everything Nicola writes. I'm a real fan girl! Her books are full of heart, real characters and hope and are a fantastic read – and *That's Just Perfect* is no exception!'

Olivia Beime, author of *Three Nights in Italy*

'Laughter, tears, and a whole lot of life lessons – this book has everything'

Gillian Harvey, author of *The Bordeaux Club*

'A heart-rending book that's very funny and poignant'

Victoria Dowd, author of *Murder Most Cold*

'Three generations, three brilliantly-drawn characters, three lives unravelling in different ways – Nicola Gill brings her beautifully drawn characters together with warmth and wit.

Laugh out loud funny yet poignant at heart, this is feelgood fiction at its best'

Frances Quinn, author of *That Bonesetter Woman*

'*That's Just Perfect* is a gorgeous tale of mess-ups, second chances and being perfectly imperfect. So relatable, real, and uplifting. Another gem from Nicola Gill'

Jessica Ryn, author of *The Imperfect Art of Caring*

'*That's Just Perfect* has all the elements readers have come to expect from Nicola Gill's novels: warm, loveable and relatable

characters facing tangible dilemmas, written with heart and humour on every page. The messaging about authenticity is beautifully executed, and the ending deeply satisfying.

It's a gorgeous book which left me feeling all is well with the world'

Kate Storey, author of *The Memory Library*

'Nicola Gill has done it again. This wonderful story about Emily, her father Ed and their mutual life regrets is very funny, uplifting but also moving. Nicola places her flawed-but-lovable characters in impossible situations, and the ensuing story is always credible and a delight. A real treat of a book. Buy it'

**Eleni Kyriacou, author of
*The Unspeakable Acts of Zina Pavlou***

'Nicola Gill has a rare talent for skilfully conjuring wonderfully complex, relatable characters which her readers are rooting for all the way, despite, or perhaps because of, all their imperfections. I loved this book so much, and just had to know what was going to happen, so that my plan to read just one chapter became one more, then one more after that each time I picked up the book. *That's Just Perfect* is full of humour, warmth and I admit, a few happy tears at the end. A perfect holiday, weekend, or indeed, anytime, read!'

Louise Fein, author of *The London Bookshop Affair*

'A cautionary tale about the lies that can so easily fester within fractured families. Hugely readable, utterly relatable and packed with appealing characters, both major and minor'

Sue Teddern, author of *The Pre-Loved Club*

‘L.O.L’s and heartbreak. I love Nicola Gill’s books and she’s done it again! I found myself loving these flawed and very real characters. Ed is so real, and Liz’s story is completely heart-breaking. You just want to get inside the pages and help her. I cried a little at the end, just before a meeting, so thanks for that Nicola Gill’

Tim Ewins, author of *Tiny Pieces of Enid*

‘Absolutely bursting with feeling! Nicola has created three perfectly imperfect characters in Liz, Ed and Emily. It’s a wonderfully heartfelt story that is sprinkled with Nicola’s humour, and I absolutely loved it!’

Holly McCulloch, author of *The Mix Up*

‘Another warm and engaging story from Nicola Gill who always manages to perfectly capture the frustrations and joys of family life. The characters are beautifully drawn – each fighting their own demons, flawed and embattled but eager to restore old relationships and build new ones. Gill handles each storyline sensitively, with trademark humour and compassion in this satisfying treat of a novel’

Nancy Peach, author of *The Mother of All Problems*

‘Nicola Gill has such a talent for creating flawed yet incredibly real and likeable characters. I couldn’t wait to get back to being in the company of Emily, Ed and Liz. Very funny and often touching, *That’s Just Perfect* is a must read for those wanting an injection of joy’

Charlotte Levin, author of *If I Let You Go*

Also by Nicola Gill

We Are Family

The Neighbours

Swimming for Beginners

NICOLA GILL

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For Patrick, and Sophie

Monday

Chapter One

Until last Friday, I had the perfect life. Now I am crying over a packet of fig rolls.

To be fair to me, they are an entirely pointless biscuit. Squidgy. But they haven't upset me for rational reasons, they've upset me because they're Mark's favourite biscuit and I have picked them up on autopilot.

I stand in the middle of the supermarket aisle trying to get a hold of myself. But this is not the sort of genteel weeping that makes men melt in the movies, it's full-on sobbing. With snot. And there's a chaser of molten rage.

It's all very un-Emily.

'Miss Baxter! Miss Baxter!'

I look around to see one of the kids from my reception class. *Marvellous*. 'Hello, Callum.'

'Why are you crying?'

'Umm... I'm not crying. I've got hay fever.'

Callum sucks his gappy teeth like the world's smallest builder. 'I thought people get hay fever in summer?'

'Umm...'

'Oh, there you are, Callum,' says his harassed-looking mum, rounding the corner with a heavily laden trolley in which a

red-faced baby sits gnawing at the soggy stump of a breadstick. 'What have I told you about running off?

'Miss Baxter,' she adds, drawing level. 'I didn't recognise you.'

I glance down at my 'outfit' – an ancient pair of joggers with a hole in the bum and a big baggy sweatshirt Mark left behind (along with me). I have worn the latter on repeat because it smelled of Mark and am pretty sure now it just smells. There are food stains all down the front too, which is a nice touch.

'You're a bit dirty,' Callum volunteers.

'*Callum!*' his mother says. 'That's very rude.' She turns back to me. 'Are you okay?'

I wipe my eyes and nose with my sleeve. What was I thinking leaving the flat? 'Fine. Just hay fever. Well, allergies really. Like a sort of autumn hay fever.'

Even the red-faced baby stops gumming its breadstick to eye me sceptically.

Callum's mother's eyes have flickered downwards, and I see her register the large pack of incontinence pads sitting at the top of my basket.

'They're for my elderly neighbour,' I say quickly.

Callum's mother gives me a small sad smile and pats me on the shoulder before leaning towards me conspiratorially. 'Don't be embarrassed. My pelvic floor is shot to pieces since the kids.'

On a different day, I might summon up the energy to insist my pelvic floor is just fine thank you.

Callum's mother leans even closer and I can smell the coffee on her breath. 'Are you crying because of what happened with Tommy Cassidy?'

My stomach lurches. How does she know about that? It only happened this morning, for God's sake. After spending the whole weekend as a shuddering mess in the flat, I managed to put on

a happy face and make it into work, where I was just about holding it together until Tommy Cassidy started whistling every time I turned my back.

'I wouldn't blame you if you did shout at him,' she says. 'He's a right little sod. We invited him to Callum's birthday party because we didn't want to leave anyone out and he nearly ruined it.' She holds her thumb and forefinger a few inches apart. 'He had his tongue this close to the motor of the bouncy castle at one point.' She shakes her head. 'If I hadn't got to him.'

My mind cartwheels. Maybe I should have talked to my head of department or even Tommy's mother about what happened? But it's not as if I *shouted* shouted. And I had already asked him to stop three times. 'It was nothing.'

Callum's mum puts her hand on my arm. 'I'm sure.'

'Callum's doing very well with his reading,' Goodness knows why I've decided to hold an impromptu parents' evening right here by the custard creams, but it sure as hell beats talking about my life.

'Can I get some chocolate biscuits, Mum?' Callum pipes up. 'Because Miss Baxter says I've been good with my reading?'

Callum's mum enters into negotiations. He can get some chocolate biscuits, but he can't have one until after his tea and then only if he's eaten his broccoli. At least four florets.

'Three?' Callum says, holding up his grubby digits.

I see my chance to get away. 'See you tomorrow, Callum.'
Assuming I can drag myself in to work.

I back away so my pupil and his family don't see the hole in the bum of my joggers. It's hard to imagine being any more humiliated, mind you. I *never* cry in public. Even when my mum died, I kept my misery firmly behind closed doors.

By the time I reach the relative safety of Foods of the World,

my heart is thudding in my chest. There cannot be problems at work. Not on top of *everything*. It will be even worse now too. For all her head-tilting faux sympathy, Callum's mum is not the type to keep things to herself. *The state of her when we bumped into her in the supermarket. She'd definitely been crying and she smelled, for goodness' sake. What happened with Tommy must have been even worse than we thought. And did you know she's incontinent too? I expect it's the stress.*

I force myself to breathe. In and out. In and out.

I *bate* this place. How have I never noticed that before? Too many people, too much noise, too much cruel, buzzing fluorescent light. And that's before you even get to the assault on your senses that is *so much stuff*.

I tell you how I've never noticed it. It's because I come here with Mark on a Sunday afternoon around 4 o'clock because he's worked out that's one of the quietest times to come. We have a list that's in the order of items in the shop.

Today, there's no list. And no Mark.

I force myself to keep moving down the aisle. Someone has dropped a jar of pasta sauce, and it is lying shattered and forlorn, its blood-red contents splattered far and wide. It has been cordoned off like a crime scene.

I think about Mark's pasta surprise, an emergency dish that comprises a jar of tomato sauce and whatever vegetables he can find hanging around in the salad drawer. Turns out he had much bigger surprises up his sleeve though.

I pick up the soy sauce Mrs Desmond asked for, guiltily registering that I haven't called my own grandma in nearly a week, despite the fact that she recently broke her shoulder and has had to temporarily go into a care home. It's not as if she's got any other family either. My father lives in Florida and, even if he

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didn't, he's about as reliable as Network Rail in bad weather. I normally talk to Grandma every few days but I just can't face telling her about Mark. She loves Mark.

I head for the alcohol section. However much I want to get out of here, I cannot leave without wine. But blocking my path is a huge display of the champagne Mark and I drank to celebrate our engagement. I feel like one of those cartoon characters with a pressure valve on their head. Why didn't I realise that all Mark's beautiful words and promises meant nothing?

Breathe, Emily, breathe.

Slowly, I manage to get myself past the champagne and throw a bottle of red into my basket. Just cat food now and I can go home and fall apart in private.

In the pet food aisle, I glance down and am surprised to see the fig rolls sitting in my basket. I have no recollection of putting them in there but guess it must have happened during the humiliating exchange with Callum and his mother. I stare at the red packet reproachfully as if it and it alone is responsible for how I feel right now.

There's a plethora of different cat meals – casseroles, pâtés, even soups. (Who serves their cat pâté or soup? Are they main meals or just appetisers?). I have always bought Pebbles the same kibble on repeat. Maybe if I'd been a bit more adventurous on his behalf, he'd like me more? I shake the thought from my brain. Pebbles likes me well enough, of course he does.

I put an 'Oh So Meaty' cat casserole in my basket and stuff the fig rolls in its place on the shelf. I have always taken a very dim view of people who put things back in random places in supermarkets, but I am desperate to get out of here.

I join the queue for self-checkout, digging my nails into my palms. An image forces its way into my consciousness: the fig

rolls among the cat food. 'Excuse me,' I say to a sharp-featured woman just ahead of me in the queue. 'Would you mind keeping an eye on my basket? I've, err, forgotten, something.'

The woman glances up from scrolling on her phone and gives an uninterested nod.

I sprint through the crowded supermarket, one hand over the hole in my jogging bottoms. A man who isn't looking where he's going barrels into me, and I apologise to him.

Panting, I reach the pet food aisle, my eyes scanning the shelves until I see the bright red packet. I pick it up and run towards the biscuit aisle, where I place it back with its squidgy pointless friends.

I rock back on my heels, my breath catching in my throat. This time last week, I was everything a woman is meant to be: calm, easy-going and, most importantly, nice.

Now look at me.