MY MESSED-UP LIFE

A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN

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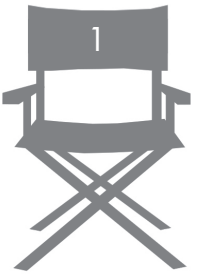
To all of my family members
– Nielsen, Fernlund, Inkster and Dixon –
I'm blessed to have
you in my life.



FOR THE RECORD: I did not mean to send my two half sisters to the emergency room.

What happened was this: Rosie – my whole sister – and I were in Los Angeles for our second annual Fake Christmas. Real Christmas had already been celebrated in Vancouver with Mom. Fake Christmas took place on the twenty-seventh of December with Dad. I called it that because everything about it, from the date to the tree to Jennica's boobs, was phony.

But the presents weren't. They were real, and there were lots of them. Rosie got a talking doll and a fairy costume and computer games and the Playmobil grocery-store set she'd always wanted, but that Mom couldn't afford. It came with tiny plastic cucumbers and apples and beans and bananas, which you could stack on a tiny stand, and four plastic people. Even I liked it, and I'm practically a teenager.

I got an iPod Touch and two new pairs of Converse high tops. The first pair was a Chuck Taylor design, with roses and skulls painted all over the fabric; the second pair was black leather. They were awesome. I also got a skirt from

Jennica, which I would never wear because I never wear skirts – only jeans and T-shirts – which you'd think she would have figured out by now.

Lola and Lucy got a bunch of presents too, even though they'd already been given tonnes of gifts when they'd celebrated their own Real Christmas. Jennica didn't want them to feel left out.

I won't lie, the gift-opening part of our visit was fun.

The weird part had been the so-called surprise.

• • •

My dad had picked us up at LAX that morning, looking tanned and buff. 'I have a surprise for you girls,' he'd said as we got on the freeway. For a fleeting, insane, Pollyanna moment, I actually thought he was going to tell us he was dumping Jennica and coming back to Vancouver.

But, instead, he drove us to Santa Monica, a beautiful neighbourhood near the ocean. He pulled into the driveway of a sprawling, modern ranch-style house with a lush garden.

'Like it? It's ours.'

I understood that by *ours,* he didn't really mean *ours*.

'Wow,' said Rosie, drawing out the word, her five-year-old self unable to keep the awe out of her voice.

'What happened to the apartment in Burbank?' I asked.

Dad shrugged. 'It was getting a little tight for the four of us. Plus it was a rental.'

The new house was beautiful. It was big. The porch didn't sag, the gutters weren't broken, and I was pretty sure the roof didn't need replacing.

It was nothing like our house in Vancouver.

I was trying to think of something mean to say when Wife Number Two dashed outside and hugged us.

'Girls, it's so lovely to see you!' Jennica said, and I was reminded all over again that she was a lousy actress. 'I like your hair, Violet. It's pretty when it's a bit longer.' I made a silent vow to ask my mom to cut it short again when we got home.

The twins were having their nap, so Dad and Jennica toured us through the house. All the rooms were on one floor, but it was a gigantic floor. I hardly recognised any of the furniture. 'Our old stuff just didn't suit this place,' Jennica told us, running her hand through her long blonde hair. 'Plus this house is *soooo* much bigger than the apartment.'

They walked us through the living room, with its sleek modern couches in shades called *mocha* and *taupe*, and into the bright, airy kitchen with its stainless steel appliances. Then they showed us the bedrooms, at the far end of the house. The master bedroom was huge, with a king-sized bed and a walk-in closet that was as big as the room Rosie and I shared at home, but without the sloped ceilings. My dad's clothes took about one-eighth of the space – the rest of the closet was stuffed full of Jennica's things. She had more clothes than my mom, Rosie, and me put together.

The twins shared the room next to Dad and Jennica's. Jennica opened the door quietly so we could peek inside. 'I wanted it to look like a fairy tale,' she whispered.

The twins were fast asleep, sprawled out on two matching canopy beds, safety bars in place so they wouldn't roll out. The canopies and duvets were covered in shimmering pink fabric. *Princess Lola* was written in silver above one bed, *Princess Lucy* above the other. A window seat was filled with pink and silver cushions. Stars and moons had been stencilled all over the ceiling. Built-in shelves held all their toys.

'And here's your room,' Jennica said, sweeping her arm toward the door at the end of the hallway like Vanna White on the 'Wheel of Fortune'. The beige walls were bare except for a bland watercolour of a sunset that hung between the IKEA-brand twin beds.

When the twins woke up, we unwrapped presents in the new living room, sitting on the floor by the fake tree. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon when we were done, so Dad took us outside. The backyard was even bigger than the front. It had a swing set, a playground-sized sandbox, and a kidney-shaped pool surrounded by a fence.

Our yard in Vancouver had a rusted trampoline with a broken leg. And mud.

'I didn't know Jennica liked to garden,' I said to my dad, as I took in all the colourful flowers and plants.

He laughed. 'She doesn't. The garden was here when we bought the place. Fortunately, our nanny has a green thumb.'

I'd forgotten about the nanny.

'It's a bit too cold for swimming,' Dad said. 'Why don't you play in the sandbox?'

As an almost-teenager, this hardly appealed to me, but Rosie and the twins loved the idea, so we dragged the lid off the sandbox and piled in. Lola and Lucy were so cute, it hurt. They were just under two years old, and they'd inherited the best of their parents' genes: Jennica's thick blonde hair and big brown eyes, and my dad's chin dimple and megawatt smile.

Rosie and I hadn't been nearly as lucky in the gene-pool lottery. Despite having the same father and a very attractive mother, all we'd inherited was Dad's mousy brown hair and his poor eyesight. He wore contacts; we wore glasses. I'd managed to get his big feet and ears, too, and his bulbous man-knees. All these things looked good on my dad, but transplanted onto a scrawny girl like me, it was seriously unfortunate.

We played with the twins for a long time in that sandbox. They adored being with Rosie and me, and I would have loved them with all my heart if I hadn't hated them so much.

After dinner we hung out in the family room, which was just as big as the living room, but more casual. Dad was on the couch reading the paper, but when Lucy and Lola crawled up beside him, he put the paper down and scooped them both into his arms, calling them 'my little starbursts'

and tickling them until they were giggling uncontrollably, a mass of little limbs.

Rosie sat nearby watching, her lips pursed.

When Jennica took the twins away so she could give them their bath, Rosie launched herself at him. 'Daddy!' she shouted, jumping onto his lap.

'*Ow!*' Dad exclaimed. 'Rosie, holy cow, you've gotten big! Sit beside me, OK? You're too heavy for my lap.' He picked her up and placed her beside him. Then he picked up his newspaper and started reading again.

Rosie's bottom lip quivered, but she didn't say a word.

'Violet, I almost forgot,' my dad said from behind the sports section. 'Do you mind going out and putting the lid on the sandbox? Our neighbours on both sides have cats.'

'Sure thing,' I said. I got up and left the room. But instead of going outside, I snuck into Dad and Jennica's enormous en-suite bathroom and had a pee and didn't flush.

At bedtime, Rosie made me guard the door while she put on a pair of pull-ups under her pyjamas.

'You won't tell anyone, will you?' she asked, her thumb slipping into her mouth.

I pulled her thumb out. 'Never.'

'Cross your heart, hope to die, stick a needle in your eye?'

'All that.'

• • •

The next morning after breakfast, the twins wanted to go back to the sandbox. I held on to their chubby little hands and led them outside, Rosie following a few steps behind. Dad and Wife Number Two stayed in the kitchen, drinking their lattes.

We'd been playing for only a few minutes when Lola asked, 'What dat?' She pointed at two big cat turds half-buried in the sand.

FOR THE RECORD: I'm not proud of what I did next. But I also don't think it called for the freak-out that followed.

What happened was this: when Rosie started to answer, I clamped my hand over her mouth. 'It's chocolate,' I said. 'Santa must have left it. Look, there's one for each of you.'

The twins reached into the sand. They picked up the turds. They popped them into their mouths. They chewed. They swallowed.

They burst into tears.

Dad and Jennica were outside in a flash. When she found out what had happened (thanks to Rosie, who couldn't tell a lie to save her life), Jennica wanted Dad to call 911. Seriously. He made her see reason, sort of, and the two of them drove the twins to the nearest hospital instead. Don't ask me what she thought an ER doctor could do. Maybe give the twins some high-powered mouthwash.

Rosie and I were left alone in the house for over two hours. We went into the family room and turned on the flat-screen TV.

I knew I was in big trouble. I knew Mom would hear about it. And I knew I should feel bad about what I'd done.

But I didn't. I felt empty – like if you looked inside me at that moment, there'd be nothing there. Just a great big blank.

About fifteen minutes into a rerun of *Arthur*, Rosie said, 'You never made *me* eat poo.' Her eyes didn't leave the TV.

'No, Rosie,' I said, gently pulling her thumb out of her mouth and taking her hand in mine. 'And I never would.'

• • •

Jennica wouldn't even look at me when they got home. That night I heard Dad on the phone to my mom, telling her about my 'ongoing troubling behaviour.' The next morning, I announced that I'd like to go back to Vancouver. Nobody argued. Rosie didn't want to leave, but she was too young to travel by herself, so she had to come with me. I packed up all our clothes and all our new gifts, except for the skirt, which I stuffed under the bed.

We were back in Vancouver in time for dinner. Fake Christmas had lasted just over twenty-four hours.