

#### PRAISE FOR MY MESSED-UP LIFE

## 'Sassy and candid' Publishers Weekly, starred review

'Funny and touching and well worth the read. Highly recommended'

CM Magazine

'Laugh-out-loud humour deftly mixes with insight into a troubled girl's pain over her parents' divorce . . . This comic novel scores'

\*\*Kirkus\*\*

'Violet is a complex, appealing character . . . a very engaging read'

\*\*Booklist\*\*

'A lot of cleverness and fun . . . Buy it'

National Post

#### PRAISE FOR OPTIMISTS DIE FIRST

'Hilarious, heart-warming and beautifully unexpected – a real keeper'

Lisa Williamson

'Susin Nielsen has produced a richly comic story featuring a cast of mismatched, engaging characters'

#### Guardian

\*Optimists Die First is both funny and heartbreaking. Fans of Rainbow Rowell's Eleanor & Park will love it

#### Red Magazine

'Nielsen writes with sensitivity, empathy and humour'

#### Kirkus, starred review

'Grief and guilt permeate Nielsen's empathic and deeply moving story, balanced by sharply funny narration and dialogue'

Publishers Weekly, starred review

#### PRAISE FOR WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES

'I defy you not to fall in love with this book'

#### Phil Earle

'A book to fortify readers against bullies and homophobes'

Sunday Times

'Snappy and witty. A really fine YA novel' **Telegraph** 

This is stellar, top-notch stuff'

Quill and Quire, starred review

#### Praise for The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen

WINNER OF THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S LITERARY AWARD, THE UKLA
AWARD AND THE CANADIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S
CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR

'A realistic, poignant portrait of one teen who overcomes nearly unbearable feelings of grief and guilt'

#### Kirkus

'A fantastic narrator, authentic and endearing . . . a memorable read for all the right reasons'

#### **Booktrust**

'Nielsen writes about the heaviest subjects with the lightest of touches . . . a truly uplifting, even happy read'

#### Lovereading

#### PRAISE FOR WORD NERD

'Ingenious and warm-hearted, Nielsen's writing boasts believable, unpredictable characterisation'

#### Guardian

Ambrose Bukowski is the titular nerd and it's in his delightful, disarming voice that Word Nerd unfolds ... a funny, wry tale'

#### Globe and Mail

'Tender, often funny. It will appeal to word nerds, but even more to anyone who has ever longed for acceptance'

School Library Journal, starred review

# MY MESSED-UP LIFE

### Also by Susin Nielsen

No Fixed Address
Optimists Die First
The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen
We Are All Made of Molecules
Word Nerd

# MY MESSED-UP LIFE

### A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN



This is a work of fiction. All references to real people, places, or events are a product of the author's imagination.

This edition published in 2018 by Andersen Press Limited 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road London SW1V 2SA www.andersenpress.co.uk

24681097531

First published in 2010 in Canada by Tundra Books as Dear George Clooney: Please Marry My Mom This edition published by arrangement with Tundra Books, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Susin Nielsen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Susin Nielsen, 2010 Art copyright © Oskar Fernlund, 2010

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 552 3



Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited, Bungay, Suffolk, NR35 1ED 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.



'Wash much?'

I sighed. Thing One (otherwise known as Ashley Anderson) stood by my desk, smirking down at me, flanked by Thing Two (otherwise known as Lauren Janicki).

'Shut your mouth much?' Phoebe snapped at her from the seat in front of me, like the awesome best friend she was.

'Honestly, some people could care less what they look like,' Ashley said to Lauren.

'Couldn't,' I said.

'What?'

*'Couldn't* care less. If you *could* care less, it means you could. Care less.' Yeah. I really said that. Honestly, there are times when I wish I could tear out my own vocal cords.

Ashley's big eyes got a little bigger. 'Oh. My. God. You are *such* a geek!' Still smirking, she strutted away, followed obediently by her posse of one.

Ashley was at the top of the food chain at Emily Carr Elementary. It didn't mean she was the most popular. It just meant she acted like she owned the place, and for some reason, we all went along with it. She radiated confidence, with her long chestnut brown hair, blue eyes, actual boobs, and unique sense of style. Like today, she was wearing hot pink tights, a long white T-shirt cinched at the waist with a big belt, black boots, big hoop earrings, and blue glitter eye shadow. On someone else, for example, *me*, it would've looked ridiculous. On Ashley, it looked cutting edge. Lauren was a copycat version of Ashley, only shorter and a bit odd-looking, like all her features were squished a little too close together.

Phoebe and I were a lot farther down the seventh-grade food chain. We weren't at the very bottom; we weren't like plankton, thank you very much. We were more like gazelles, or maybe field mice, which meant Thing One and Thing Two could eat us for breakfast whenever they felt like it.

I glanced down at my T-shirt. Sure enough, there was a food stain, most likely spaghetti sauce. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it this morning. Truth is, I'd been dressing Rosie and me in our least dirty dirty clothes since we got back from L.A. because the washing machine was still broken and Mom and I hadn't had a chance to get to the Laundromat yet.

I subtly dipped my head close to one pit, then the other, to do a B.O. check. Thank God all I could smell was deodorant.

'Do a couple of loads at my house later tonight,' Phoebe whispered to me. 'Cathy and Günter won't mind.' Cathy and Günter are Phoebe's parents. Cathy is Chinese-Canadian and

Günter is Swiss-Canadian. They're both psychologists, and neither of them like being called Mom and Dad because it sounds 'too hierarchical.'

'I think I'll take you up on that,' I said to her. I held out my fist, and we did a fist bump.

• •

Phoebe had been my best friend since kindergarten, when the teacher made us bathroom buddies. Once I didn't make it in time and I peed my pants. Phoebe helped me flush my soaking underwear down the toilet and never breathed a word to anyone – even after the toilet backed up and flooded the basement and the school tried to find out who'd clogged the drain with a pair of Elmo briefs.

Now that's loyalty.

Phoebe also understood me better than anyone else, even my mom. Predictably, Mom flipped out over the Turd Incident. I'd been grounded for the rest of the Christmas holidays, including New Year's Eve, which truly sucked since I had to turn down a whole bunch of party invitations – not. My mom never clued in that grounding me was pretty much a pointless punishment, since aside from hanging out with Phoebe – which I was still allowed to do, even when I was grounded – I had no social life.

But when I told Phoebe what had happened, this was what she said: 'Wow.' Then, 'How big were they?' Then,

'I can't believe they actually . . .' Then, 'I get that you were tempted. But I can't believe you actually *did* it.' And, finally, 'You took out your anger on the wrong people.'

Then we'd dropped the subject and exchanged Christmas gifts. I gave Phoebe a notebook with a stick figure of a boy on the cover that said *Boys Stink. Throw Rocks at Them.* She gave me a Magic 8 Ball. It was as big as a baseball, and it could supposedly predict the future. You could ask a question, give the ball a shake, and an answer would appear, floating on a little triangle, in a small round window at the base of the ball. We asked it a lot of questions, including my favourite: 'Will Ashley's hair fall out in clumps this year?' The Magic 8 Ball responded, *It is certain*.

It was an awesome gift.

• • •

'Violet, look,' Phoebe whispered. 'It's your boyfriend.'

Jean-Paul Bouchard had just entered the room. He'd arrived at our school in late October, from Winnipeg. He was seriously cute, but he was just as seriously *not* my boyfriend. One, because a guy like him would never even look at a girl like me, and two, because I had made a vow to myself post-Jonathan that I would never have a boyfriend because love is more trouble than it's worth.

We watched as Ashley subtly followed Jean-Paul's movements through the classroom, like a hunter tracking its prey. She was talking to Lauren and Claudia and doing a good job of acting like she was giving them her full attention. But the moment Jean-Paul sat down, Ashley broke away from her friends and slipped into the seat in front of him. She turned around, flashed him a pearly white smile, and started chatting.

'I hate her,' I murmured.

'I want to be her,' Phoebe replied.

And the two of us knew that it was perfectly natural to have both those feelings all at once.

• • •

Phoebe had a Mandarin lesson after school, so I picked up Rosie from her after-school care programme in the basement on my own. When I came in, she was sitting in a corner, sucking her thumb.

'What's wrong, Rosie?'

'Isabelle tore my fairy wings.' She took her thumb out of her mouth and held out the wings from the costume Dad had given her. One of them had a small tear. 'She did it on purpose.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'So why are you sitting in the corner?'

'Because I bit her.'

'Oh.'

Alison, one of the daycare workers, joined us. 'It's the

third time she's bitten Isabelle this year,' she said to me, like Rosie wasn't there.

'The girl tore her wings. They were a present from our dad.'

'That's still no excuse for biting. Will you tell your mother what happened, or should I write a note?'

I held out my hands and pulled Rosie to her feet, refusing to make eye contact with Alison. 'I'll tell her,' I lied. Then to Rosie, 'I might be able to fix your wings.'

I held Rosie's hand as we walked the two blocks to Main Street, my backpack slung over one shoulder, her backpack slung over the other. The hoods of our jackets were pulled up to protect us from the cold January rain.

When we reached Main Street, we stopped so Rosie could press her nose against the window of the Liberty Bakery and gaze at the mouthwatering baked goods on display in the glass cases. A few blocks later, we crossed King Edward and stopped to inhale the aroma of bacon wafting from Helen's Diner. Another block up, we arrived outside the William Berto School of Hair Design. I opened the door, and we clomped up the stairs.

The school took up the entire second floor of the building. By the windows facing the street, a row of stations were set up for the students, with swivel chairs and giant mirrors. On the far wall was a row of sinks. A few students were at their stations, cutting and colouring customers' hair. Because they always needed heads to practice on, the

school advertised five-dollar haircuts, and they got a steady stream of walk-ins.

'Girls, hi!' my mom said, waving us over. She was giving her friend Amanda a trim. She stopped what she was doing to give us each a hug.

Even though she was in her late thirties, my mom was still super-pretty. She had thick brown hair that fell just past her shoulders, green eyes, and lips that my dad used to call irresistibly kissable. She'd even managed to keep her figure, for the most part.

It was her clothes I couldn't stand. She'd started dressing differently after the divorce papers were signed. Her jeans were too tight, and her top was cropped to let her stomach show, a stomach that had had to stretch not once but twice to hold babies. A soft layer of flab drooped over the waist of her jeans. To top it off, her belly button was pierced – a belated birthday gift from her friend Karen after they'd had a few too many margaritas one night.

I sat down in the chair next to Amanda's. 'Good to see you guys,' Amanda said, giving us each a high five. Amanda was younger than my mom and wore really cool clothes, a combination of secondhand stuff and amazing sweaters she'd knit herself. But even though she probably could have pulled it off, she didn't expose a lot of flesh. If only Mom had taken her fashion cues from Amanda and not her other best friend.

'Thanks for the hats; we wear them all the time,' I said to Amanda as I took off my toque. She'd knit one for me and one for Rosie for Christmas. Mine was a dog hat, complete with eyes and whiskers, and the flaps on the sides were knit to look like beagle ears. Rosie's was a kitten hat, with little cat ears sewn onto the top.

'Can you cut my hair when you're done?' I asked my mom.

'I thought you were letting it grow out.'

'I changed my mind.'

'I wanna play in a chair,' Rosie said. She loved to spin around and around in one of the chairs until she was so dizzy, she couldn't stand up.

'Sure thing, sweetie. Take the one in the far corner.' Rosie skipped away.

Once she was gone, Amanda grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Violet, you know I love you. But cat turds?'

I turned to Mom. 'Did you have to tell everyone?'

'Amanda isn't everyone,' Mom replied. 'She's one of my best friends.'

'As long as you didn't tell your *other* best friend,' I said, just as I heard a cackle behind me.

I didn't need to turn around because I could see her in the mirror: Karen, approaching at high speed. You know those old cartoons where the character has an angel version of himself sitting on one shoulder and a devil version on the other? Well, Amanda was like my mom's angel version because she brought out the best in her. Karen was like my mom's devil version because she brought out the worst. 'Cat turds!' She laughed, an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. 'I've gotta hand it to you, Violet, that's a new low.'

'Hey, Karen. Nice top,' I said, nodding at her twosizes-too-small sheer black top that announced, in big gold letters, *COUGAR*. I could clearly see her pink bra underneath. She wore a thick layer of make-up, and her hair was dyed platinum blonde.

Mom and Karen had what my mom referred to as 'history'. They used to work as a team in the film and TV business – Mom as the key hairstylist, Karen as her assistant. Karen was even there when my mom met my dad. Shortly after Rosie was born, Mom left the business to stay home with us, but when Dad took off, she needed to find a job fast. A job with regular hours and a steady paycheque. That's how she wound up teaching at the William Berto School of Hair Design. It was in the neighbourhood, the pay was OK, and they loved my mom's work. Within a year, she was promoted to assistant manager. Six months later, Mom hired Karen, after she was fired from two productions in a row for showing up late all the time.

Yup. That was my mom in a nutshell: always wanting to see the best in people, even when it was clear to everyone else that they were nothing but losers.

'Maybe you need to see that therapist again,' Karen said to me as she reapplied her lipstick in the mirror. 'That's pretty twisted behaviour.' My cheeks burned. Oh, how I hated her sometimes.

'Karen,' my mom said in her warning voice, 'I've dealt with it. And Violet's going to properly apologise, aren't you, Violet?'

'We really need to get the washing machine fixed,' I said.

'I know. And we will, in a couple more weeks. I'm still paying off Christmas.'

'If you could've seen Dad's new house—'

'Violet—'

'What about his new house?' asked Amanda.

'It's huge. They just bought it. Dad's obviously loaded. He has way more money than when you guys first split up.'

'Violet, enough. We've been through this. I don't want to take more of his money.'

'But why?'

'Because she doesn't want to get handouts from that cheating son of a bitch, right, Ingrid?' Karen said.

'Karen, do *not* trash-talk the girls' father in front of them,' Mom said.

'Oops', Karen replied, not sounding the least bit apologetic. 'I'm going out for a smoke.' She tottered away in her platform wedgies. Amanda raised a discreet eyebrow at me in the mirror, and I raised one back. I was pretty sure Amanda wasn't nuts about Karen, either.

'I'm going to have to ask you to get supper for you and Rosie tonight,' Mom said, as she turned her attention back to trimming Amanda's long red hair. 'There's a pizza in the freezer.'

'Why, what are you doing?' I asked, dreading the answer. 'I have a date.'

Amazing how four little words can make you feel like you want to throw up.

'Please tell us you're not going out with Alphonse again,' said Amanda, wrinkling her nose.

Alphonse was this creep my mom had met on Havalife, an online dating service that Karen had convinced her to join. He was about the fifth guy she'd met that way. They'd all been losers, but Alphonse was in a category all his own. Twice, he'd taken my mom out to really fancy restaurants. Twice, he'd ordered the most expensive things on the menu. Twice, he'd 'forgotten' his wallet and Mom had to pay.

'No, not Alphonse, give me some credit.'

Amanda and I shared another look. We wanted to give her some credit, we really did.

'This is a new one. And I didn't meet him online. I met him in the flesh.'

'Where?' asked Amanda.

'He came in for a haircut last week.'

'So we know he's cheap,' I said.

Mom ignored this. 'He seems really sweet.'

Which is exactly what you've said about all the other losers you've dated, I wanted to say.

'Really . . . genuine.'

Ditto.

Amanda pursed her lips. But all she said was 'Too bad we couldn't set you up with *him*.' She nodded at an eight-by-ten glossy photo that hung over Mom's workstation, beside a bunch of photos of Rosie and me. Smiling out at us from the picture was George Clooney.

Mom loved George Clooney. She'd loved him long before he'd become super-famous. Mom loved him from the first time she'd seen him in a sitcom called *The Facts of Life*, which was on TV when she was a teenager, back in the Dark Ages. I'd seen it a few times myself, on one of those cable channels that airs nothing but sitcoms from the 1980s, which seems to be a decade where everyone – even George – had really bad hair.

The photo my mom had was older than me, but it was personally signed to her because she'd actually *met* George Clooney. When she was still new to the business, she'd do what were known as day calls, filling in for stylists who were sick. One day, she'd been called to a movie set, and who walked into the trailer but George himself. She actually got to do his hair. That's right, she touched his head. And he obviously liked her because he'd written on the picture *To Ingrid – May Our Paths Cross Again*.

Even now, as she gazed at the photo, her expression went all mooshy. 'He was amazing. So sweet, so charming. So freaking *gorgeous* . . . he was perfect.'

•

'I wanted one pink streak! One!'

Mom tore her gaze away from George Clooney. Three stations away, an older woman was shrieking at a cowering male student. Every hair on her head was hot pink.

Mom took a deep breath. 'I'll have to cut your hair another time, Violet.' She put down her scissors and walked away to deal with the crisis.

I said goodbye to Amanda and collected Rosie from her chair. She wobbled and fell in a heap of giggles onto the floor. 'That was fun!'

'C'mon,' I said, pulling her to her feet and adjusting her glasses, which were crooked from all the spinning. 'We have lots to do when we get home.'

And I wasn't just talking about doing the laundry, finishing my homework, and making supper.

Because when Mom has a date, she isn't the only one who has to prepare for it.