

CHAPTER ONE

*My Life on Planet Toilet Paper*

• Justine •

*I* hate being the new kid at school. Just. Hate. It.

And I always am. Okay: maybe not always. Maybe not *every* year. But almost. Or at least it seems that way. First Houston, then Germany, and then Saint Louis, back to Germany, and then, for two whole years, San Francisco, and now I'm in tenth grade and starting all over again, this time in West Falls, New Jersey, which my mother says is, quote, "so sophisticated," and my father says is, quote, "close to everything." By which he means: (a) his office and (b) an airport.

"Don't worry, Pooky," he emailed to me from his office downtown on the day after he'd broken the news. "They have shopping there, too."

Ha. Ha.

He gets transferred around a lot. He also travels. The rest of us — which is me, Mom, and our cat, Skizz — follow. Before she'd had me, Mom had been a dancer: She'd been a member of

a company in Boston. Now she jokes that she's his senior staff and I'm his junior staff.

Our New Jersey house, which I'd secretly named Homely Acres, has three levels, connected by half flights of stairs, and a two-car garage. The room my parents chose for me is on the second level, same as theirs, but unlike theirs, mine is painted a pale, sickening lavender-pink and smells vaguely of sugar, like maybe there's ancient spilled Coke that soaked into the floorboards. There's no point in getting it repainted, either — not the way we move around. "You'll love it," Mom said.

We moved in early August, just in time to arrive in West Falls for my fifteenth birthday, which I celebrated with Mom at a not-very-good Chinese restaurant, because even though he'd promised me that he wouldn't miss what he called my "big day" for anything, Dad ended up working late, calling me on my cell phone while I was in mid-sesame-noodle-slurp. "I'm so sorry, Pooky," he said. "I'll try to make it up to you soon, okay?"

West Falls itself was dead, and that's because everyone over the age of two and under the age of ninety was at the beach. As for people my age to make friends with? It was as if they'd all been vaporized and sent to another planet.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "Once school starts up again, you'll be back in the swing."

I hated when she said that: *back in the swing*. What did that even *mean*?

In San Francisco I'd fallen in with a bunch of nerdy brainiac types, and through them I met my best friend, Eliza. Mainly we hung out at the beach and, on weekends, explored the Castro

or the Haight or any other neighborhood that, once upon a time, had been utterly cool. It was on one of these excursions that I discovered vintage. It was a whole new look for me, a mash-up of hippie and gypsy and blues singer. The look made me feel not just *visible*, but also like a person in my own right, and not just an extension of my parents' ideas about who I'm supposed to be.

Neither one of them was exactly crazy about my new look, though. Mom told me straight-out that she thought I looked better in what she calls "normal" clothes. Dad barely noticed at all. Even when it came to my going-away party, he barely glanced up. It was cold and misty, so I wore my absolute favorite dark-green velvet hip-hugging bell-bottoms with black ballerina slippers and a pink silk top, bona fide vintage Pucci.

"Have fun, Pooky," he said from behind his computer.

I'm Justine. The story they told me was that I was supposed to be *Justin*, like my grandfather who died before I was born, but then I turned out to be a girl.

Justine Ruth Gandler.

The. Worst. Name. Ever.

Another thing Mom thought was just swell about Homely Acres? It was right across the street from a girl exactly my age and her little brother. Only they were at the beach. "Everyone says they're very nice," Mom said. "And there's another girl who lives just up the street, too, who goes to your high school. She's supposed to be very nice, too. Everyone said so."

“What do you mean, *everyone*? We don’t know anyone here, remember?”

“That’s not exactly true, darling. I talked — at length — to the people we bought this house from. Very nice people. Very nice. They told me that we were in luck because of the nice girls across the street and up the road. I’m sure they can’t wait to meet you.”

“Goody,” I said.

I didn’t know which was worse: August with no one around other than my mother (because Dad was already working 24/7) and nothing to do but lie on my bed in my puke-pink bedroom with Skizz sleeping on my stomach missing Eliza, or starting a new school. Again.

“What are you going to wear?” Eliza wanted to know.

“I’m not sure,” I said, though I’d been obsessing about it for days, trying and rejecting half a dozen different outfits, including movie-starlet-style cutoffs with a white button-down cinch-waist blouse, a vaguely Indian-looking printed silk maxi skirt with ankle boots and a black tank top (it was from the Gap, but it still looked great), and a black classic sixties one-piece mini with a silver zipper up the front, which I usually wore with red cowboy boots.

“*You?* Not sure? Since when are you not sure?”

“I know. But it’s different here. For one thing, it’s hot.”

“Of course it’s hot. It’s summer.”

“Yeah, but here it’s sticky hot. Humid. Like the air is filled with spit.”