

Chapter 1

Thursday, July 14th, 1977

The first thing Francie Goldberg's eyes focused on as she struggled awake that morning was a copy of *Hop on Pop*. It was sitting on the little desk that her father had refinished and painted for her the previous summer. He had worked on the desk for many evenings — many evenings that Francie had spent sitting cross-legged on the floor of his studio upstairs, watching as he magically coaxed fairies and twining vines out of the white paint.

“Every first grader needs a desk,” he had said to her as he'd poised his brush above a knob on one of the drawers.

“Why?” Francie had asked.

“Because you're going to have homework. You'll need a place for your workbooks and pencils.”

Homework. The very word had made Francie feel proud. She was going to learn to read in first grade, and she would have homework like her friend Amy Fox, who lived next door

and was a year older and came home from school every day with important-looking papers sticking out of a green folder.

But now a whole year had gone by — all of first grade — and while Francie had indeed been sent home with homework, she'd spent a year struggling through exercises and trying to keep up with the students in the Red Wagon Group, which every kid in her class knew was the lowest of the three reading groups, no matter what it was called. Francie couldn't even keep up with the slow readers. She could barely read at all. Letters flipped themselves around and upside down. A *p* looked just like a *d* or a *b*, and words seemed to shift on her. Really, what was the difference between *read* and *dear* or *pets* and *pest* or, for that matter, between *kitchen* and *chicken*?

This was why three times a week, all summer long, she had to endure a visit from Mrs. Travers, with her work sheets and flash cards and suggestions to her parents that they buy Francie *Hop on Pop* and *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*.

From across her bedroom, Francie stuck out her tongue at *Hop on Pop*. She hated that book. She'd gone to all the trouble of memorizing it so that she could tell Mrs. Travers she could read after all, and then Mrs. Travers had opened to a page in the middle and told Francie to read it and Francie hadn't known where to begin without beginning at the beginning.

At least Mrs. Travers wouldn't be coming today. Thursday was not a Mrs. Travers day.

Francie sat up in bed and peered through her open window. She listened to the sound of traffic on Nassau Street — Princeton, New Jersey's, main street — which was a block away. The air drifting into her room was already hot. It smelled like grass and sunshine and the lavender plants that lined the walkway to the front door of her house. She looked at her yard below, with the flower gardens that her mother tended, and then across the street to the Newcomers' large Victorian house, with its many bedrooms and five Newcomer children. Francie's house was equally large, but the only people living in it were her and her parents, Dana and Matthew.

Francie padded into the hallway. She was about to make her way downstairs when she noticed that the door to the room next to hers was closed. This was one of the guest rooms, and the door had been open when Francie had gone to bed the night before. She quickened her pace and ran to the kitchen.

"Hi, Dana!" she said to her mother. (Francie's parents, unlike the parents of most of her friends, preferred to be called by their first names.)

"Morning, pumpkin."

Francie slid into her place at the table. "Why is the guest room door closed?" she asked.

Dana, who was busy at the coffeemaker, turned around and smiled. “Guess who’s here,” she said.

Francie thought for a moment. “Grandpa Arnold and Nonnie?” she asked, even though her father’s parents lived only an hour away and rarely stayed overnight with the Goldbergs.

Dana shook her head.

“Adele?” said Francie, excitement blooming. “Is Adele here?”

“Yes, I am,” said her great-aunt from the doorway.

Francie jumped up from her chair and ran to Adele. “You *are* here!” She paused. “But *why*? I didn’t know you were coming.”

Adele laughed and then stifled a yawn. “I didn’t know I was coming either. But when I was driving back home last night after a little vacation, I heard on the news that there was a blackout in New York. Most of the city is without power, so I decided to come here instead of going to my apartment.”

“A blackout,” Francie repeated. “Ooh. Scary.” The few times the power had gone out in Princeton, the Goldbergs had pretended they were pioneers and had eaten meals by candlelight and told one another stories, since they couldn’t watch TV. That had been fun. But Francie wasn’t sure she’d want to be in a city the size of New York without electricity.

“It *is* scary,” agreed Adele. “Think of all the things in a city that don’t work without power. Elevators — not that there’s an elevator in my building, but still. Streetlights, traffic lights. And I don’t even want to think about the subways. So I’m going to stay here until the power’s back.”

“I hope that’s not for a long time,” said Francie. “A long, long time.” Adele, who was Dana’s aunt, was Francie’s favorite person in the whole world except for her parents and Amy Fox. “Is Bobbie Palombo’s closed?”

“I suppose so,” replied Adele. “I think everything is closed.” Adele worked for a woman named Bobbie Palombo, designing costumes for Broadway shows. Because of this, she went to the theatre all the time and had already taken Francie to see *Hello, Dolly!* and *Gypsy*. Francie thought that, maybe, when she grew up, she might design costumes, too. *Maybe*. She wasn’t sure. It was hard to think that far ahead.

Adele took a seat at the table and Dana handed her a cup of coffee. Adele yawned again. “Where’s Matthew?” she asked.

“Upstairs. He’s just waking up,” replied Francie’s mother. “He worked until after two last night. He’s going to have to get a move on, though. He’s helping with a new exhibit at the art museum. He’s supposed to be over there in an hour.”

“And you?” Adele asked. “What are you doing today?”