

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Crisis

*Darby*

It was Delaney's idea that we ruin Lily's wedding. She'll probably argue and say it wasn't, but it was.

We were in an emergency meeting in the Triangular Office — which is our bedroom. We used to have the room next to Lily's, but when we got too big for our cribs, Mom and Dad realized they couldn't fit three beds in there, so they moved us up into the attic. Because our house is old, there are spots that creak when you stand on them and teeny gaps in the wall and floor, but overall it's nice and airy and far away from the other rooms, so we don't have to worry about being heard. It has real wood plank walls and a real wood plank floor and a window that looks out over the front lawn. Not only is it spacious enough for three beds, it

also fits three bookcases, three chairs, and a large desk that we share. There's even a big walk-in closet for our clothes, bins of old toys, boxes of Christmas decorations that won't fit in the storage room downstairs, and a collection of wooden Revolutionary War replica swords that Mom only lets us bring out on patriotic holidays.

Anyway, because it's an attic, the ceiling slopes up to a point at the top of the roof like a triangle, so we call it the Triangular Office.

"I call this meeting to order," Dawn said, pounding her fist like a gavel against her headboard. "We need to deal with this very important and horrible situation — which is that our sister is planning to marry a . . . a . . ."

"A rapsCALLION?" Delaney said.

"A scalawag?" I said.

Dawn considered our suggestions. "I think he's more of a nincompoop."

"Who looks like an armadillo," Delaney added. "Without the shell."

We agreed this was a good comparison. Burton is skinny and squinty-eyed, with a long, thin nose. He never comes out of the library. Plus, he runs funny. We know this because he got scared by a bee a couple of weeks ago.

“What does Lily see in him?” Delaney asked. It was the same question we’d been asking ourselves since she started dating him last December. That’s probably why Delaney said it to the piggy bank shaped like the Liberty Bell that she held in her hands. She knew we didn’t have any answers.

I should explain that Lily is our older sister. And when I say older, I mean much older. She is twenty-two and we are eleven. After years of being told she couldn’t have more babies, our mom was really surprised to find out she was pregnant. She and Dad were even more surprised when they found out she was pregnant with triplets. The family doubled in size in a matter of months. We stayed that way for a long time — Dawn, Delaney, and me, plus Lily, and Mom and Dad — until Mom and Dad divorced two years ago. Now it’s just five of us in the house — all girls, unless you count Quincy, our Labrador retriever. But Dad lives just a few minutes away, which means that in addition to our official weekends with him, we often bump into him here and there.

So we all just sat there thinking about how much we loved our sister and how much we disliked the doofus she wanted as her husband. And that’s when Delaney said, “We have to stop it.”

See? Her idea.

Only . . . we all agreed. We took a vote and everything. We just didn't know how we could possibly stop a wedding.

"Darby, you should take notes," Dawn said.

"Me? Why me?"

"As your eldest sister and the future president of the United States, I think we need to put this down on paper so we can figure out what to do."

"Delaney's the youngest, and she's going to be Speaker of the House, where they write the laws," I pointed out. "Shouldn't she do it?"

Dawn shook her head. "You know she can't sit still that long."

"Plus," added Delaney, "you type the fastest."

I did what any person who plans to be chief justice of the United States should do — I listened to all sides before forming my opinion. In this case, I decided they were right. So I sat down at the desk and turned on the computer.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, all ready with my hands on the keyboard.

We sat there for a while, just thinking. Then Dawn said, "Let's review the facts."

So we did. And this is what I typed:

Last Friday, at about 21:00 hours, Lily came home from her date with Burton and called Mom and the three of us into the living room.

Lily was kind of pink-faced and was talking really fast. At first, Mom thought she had been in a car accident, but it was worse than that. She said Burton had asked her to marry him and she said yes.

Mom mumbled, “Oh my.”

We mumbled, “Oh no.”

Lily told us that they’d decided the wedding would take place in one month. They wanted it to happen soon because once he finishes up a big paper for his master’s degree, he’s moving to Illinois to go to a law school.

Delaney asked Lily if she would stop studying to be a teacher, and Lily said no — she would just finish her degree in Illinois instead of Texas.

I asked her if she and Burton would get married on the hill. (The hill is on our property behind our house. It’s great for the Slip ’N Slide. Lily loves it, too, and she always said she wanted to get married on it, right at sunset.)

Lily said no. Burton has allergies.

She then said that we would be in the wedding, too. Dawn asked who we were going to marry, and Lily said no one. We were going to be her flower girls.

Only, she said we wouldn't scatter real flowers. We would have to use fake ones. Because Burton has allergies.

Mom mumbled, "Oh boy."

We mumbled, "Oh no." (Actually, it was a little louder than a mumble.)

Delaney pointed out that this would make us "fake flower girls," and Dawn and I agreed. Lily just laughed and said that we would be real flower girls — even if the flowers were plastic.

Then Lily said, "I better call Dad," and went into Mom's office.

We turned toward Mom and started saying things like "Isn't it horrible?" and "Plastic flowers are stupid" and "Tell her she can't do it!"

Mom said that Lily was a grown woman and could make her own decisions. She said we needed to give Burton a chance, and that the main reason we don't like him is because we miss Alex.

Then Mom said she had a headache and went to lie down.

"Mom's right," Dawn said, reading over my shoulder. "I miss Alex."

"Me, too," I said.

“Me three,” Delaney said.

Alex was Lily’s boyfriend before Burton. They met in middle school and started to date their sophomore year of high school. He used to hang out here with her all the time. His favorite president is Thomas Jefferson. We all respect that.

Once, Dawn asked Burton who his favorite U.S. president was, and do you know what he said? Franklin Pierce! We asked why, and he said because he was President Pierce’s great-great-great-grandnephew — or something like that. Now, the three of us don’t even agree on who the best president was. Dawn’s favorite is Washington, Delaney’s is Lincoln, and mine is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But we all agree that they were good ones. And we all agree that Pierce was *not* one of the best.

Anyway, when Lily and Alex graduated high school, Lily went to the University of Texas just down the road in Austin, and Alex went to Tulane University in New Orleans. They were still a couple, though, and Alex would visit during the breaks and occasionally on a weekend. But for some reason, they broke up last summer. Lily never said why — she just went all mopey and droopy-looking for a long time. And then Burton nosed his way into her life.

For the rest of the meeting — in fact, for the rest of the weekend — we were too sad to think of ideas. It started to seem like we were going to end up related to a sneezy, squinty, Franklin Pierce-loving armadillo.

Then, on Monday, Delaney saw Alex downtown and everything changed. . . .