

REVENGE

OF THE TEACHER'S PETS



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SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

CHAPTER ONE

Old Glory

Darby

It was all our faults that we turned into troublemakers in seventh grade. Before school started, everything was fine. In fact, we'd just had our best summer yet. Here is the evidence:

- Our older sister, Lily, and her fiancé, Alex, both graduated from college and moved back to town. Plus, Aunt Jane, who had been living in Boston since we were four, sold her pub and moved back to Texas. Now she was helping to run a campground that's a few hours from here. Everyone we loved was back in Texas.
- Lily and Alex were finally going to get married! They were probably going to hold the wedding over Thanksgiving break, since everyone would have time off — and because that's Lily's favorite holiday. In the

meantime, Alex was working for a Texas congresswoman, and Lily had taken a part-time job at the library here in Johnson City and was living at home with us.

- We grew almost two inches! Delaney was still the tallest by about a quarter of an inch, followed by Dawn, then me. (Although I think Dawn might have cheated a little and puffed herself up when we got measured.)
- We got lasso lessons from Lucas Westbrook. We also had lots of fun on the Slip 'n' Slide down the hill behind our house, and at Lake Lewis, the campground where Aunt Jane was now working. Plus, altogether we read twenty-four books and each earned a free ice-cream cone.

But on the last day of vacation, everything started going bad . . .

I sat on the porch swing, yawning and trying to blink my eyes wider and wider. We'd woken up early to hang our American flag and do back-to-school exercises. Dawn and I had gotten used to sleeping late over the summer and needed to get back into the habit of waking up at 6:45 a.m. Since Delaney always gets up early, no matter what time of year,

she didn't need to practice. Instead, she was working on something else.

"Delaney, your foot keeps bouncing," Dawn said. "You're shaking the swing."

"I'm being still and quiet!" Delaney said. She was sitting on my right at one end of the porch swing. Her back was so stiff and straight, she wasn't even resting against the back slats. And Dawn was right — Delaney was wiggling her feet so much, the whole swing jostled.

"When we said practice sitting quietly, we didn't mean like a statue," Dawn said. She was on my left, at the other end of the swing, which meant I was stuck in the middle. Since I was born in the middle, I was sort of used to it.

"It's the only thing that works," Delaney said. "If I make myself super still, I won't wiggle."

"Well, your feet aren't getting the message," Dawn groused.

"I'm doing my best!" Delaney said.

"She's trying," I repeated. I knew that Delaney usually spent her mornings bouncing in the yard with Mynah, her pet rabbit, or playing chase with Quincy, our loyal yellow Labrador, to get out all her pent-up energy. But since she hadn't done either of those things yet, she was extra wiggly. "I think we should be more supportive."

Dawn made a harrumphing noise. Probably because she knew I was right but didn't want to admit it. Dawn felt she was our leader — and not just because she was born first.

She is just one of those strong-willed types who can't help taking charge. Of everyone. All the time.

I yawned again and gazed up at our flag, waving in the breeze atop the pole in our front yard. I love how the wind makes flags dance and flap — or, if there's no wind, sag as if they feel sulky. It's like they can go through different moods or get tired or excited, just like people. I guess that's why they're such good symbols for nations. Nations are full of people.

I felt a little bit of shaking and glanced over at Delaney. She wasn't jiggling her legs, but her rear end must have been shimmying ever so slightly, enough to make the swing move.

"Don't worry, Delaney," I said, patting her left shoulder. "Just ten more minutes and we'll have flag marching practice."

That made Delaney smile without turning her head. The best thing about going into seventh grade was that we could now be in the Color Guard, a special troop that officially hangs the school's American flag every morning. The group also marches and does routines at football games and other special events with silver and navy flags, our school colors. Almost every day this summer, after hanging our own flag, we'd rehearse twirling and marching with our old Quidditch broomsticks so that we'd be the best in the regiment.

In elementary school, we'd helped raise the flag every morning on account of our extensive knowledge about how to correctly handle the Stars and Stripes. When we went to

middle school, we were told that the Color Guard did that as part of their duties, but only seventh and eighth graders could be in it. So really, we've been waiting for over a year, not just a summer. We were eager to go back to official flag duties. At our old school, we'd been known as the expert flag girls, and it was nice. It made us feel important.

Unfortunately, mentioning flag practice made Delaney excited, and her feet started kicking again.

“Stop bouncing the swing!” Dawn said.

“Sorry.” Delaney’s forehead scrunched in a look of intense concentration — or maybe pain.

I felt bad for her. “You know, Dawn,” I said, “you should work on not being so high-handed.”

“I’m not being high-handed.”

“You are,” Delaney said, nodding her head ever so slightly while still staring straight ahead. “And quarrelsome.”

“I’m not —” Dawn stopped herself. She pursed her lips together and folded her arms across her chest, as if she were trying to trap her words inside of her.

“You should practice not being that way. School isn’t the place to be telling people what to do all the time,” Delaney said.

“Sure it is. If you remember, I was an exemplary hall monitor in fifth grade.” Dawn lifted her chin proudly.

“Yeah, except that our school didn’t actually have hall monitors,” I pointed out. “But you made yourself one anyway.”

“Oh, right.” Dawn’s eyes swiveled upward. “I forgot.”

I chuckled to myself, remembering how Dawn would hand out hallway warnings that she’d made herself out of Mom’s yellow sticky pads. The students were confused, but they actually did what she said. I guess they’d assumed she was official. She probably would have gotten away with it a lot longer if she hadn’t given a warning to Ms. Mendoza, the school clerk, when she was running down the hall to answer the office phone. Sometimes Dawn can get a little carried away.

When I laughed at the memory, Dawn must have thought I was making fun of her, because she scowled at me. “You also need to work on something else, Darby,” she said. “You need to practice not being so bashful.”

It was my turn to scowl. I knew Dawn was just trying to get back at me, but she was also right. I’m shy around people I don’t know very well, so school can be kind of frightful. Luckily, I have two loudmouthed sisters who will speak up for me.

“Oh, hey. Here comes Mr. Pete with the mail,” Dawn said, pointing toward the white post office truck that was stopping at mailboxes next to all the driveways on our street. “Darby, maybe you should —”

“I’ll get it!” Delaney shouted, leaping off the swing. Before we could say anything more, she was racing up the driveway. The dust churned up by her sneakers made it seem like she was leaving a trail of exhaust smoke.

“Dadgummit,” Dawn grumbled, “I wanted you to do it. Seriously, Darby, your training should be to talk to someone outside of close friends and family.”

“I could go over and visit with Ms. Woolcott.” I pointed toward our next-door neighbor’s house.

“No,” Dawn said. “I don’t think that’s the best solution. You already know Ms. Woolcott pretty well. Besides, she’d do all the talking.”

I nodded. Ms. Woolcott sure loved to chat.

“I know!” Dawn suddenly sat up as straight as Delaney had been. “You should walk down the road and introduce yourself to the new neighbors.”

My face went tingly. “But . . . why?”

“Because it’s what decent folk do. Besides, I heard they have a kid our age.”

I’d heard that, too. Ms. Woolcott had told us that a few days ago, when we were talking with her by the fence. Unlike me, Ms. Woolcott had done her best to find out everything about the people who moved into the brown house with the giant live oak out front — the one that used to belong to Mr. Hockley, the high school basketball coach, before he retired and moved someplace that had better fishing. (That’s another one of the things Ms. Woolcott told us.)

“Face it,” Dawn went on. “You’ve got to stop being so chicken-hearted around people, and this would be the best way to practice.”

I glanced over at Delaney, who was still standing at the

end of our drive, chatting with Mr. Pete. Some poor townsfolk would get their mail late today.

I felt a twinge of envy. If only I could be a little more like Delaney. She could talk to anyone at any time.

“In solidarity with you, I promise to do my darndest not to ride herd over folks.” Dawn tilted her head and her forehead went wavy. She seemed sincere. “Deal?”

“Deal,” I said and then held out my hand for her to shake. But before she could, we heard a commotion in the distance.

“Emergency!” Delaney was running down the driveway toward us, shouting and waving some papers in her right hand. “Emergency! Emergency!”

Dawn and I exchanged confused looks and ran to the porch railing. It didn’t seem like there was an emergency. There was no wreckage on the road behind her and Delaney didn’t look injured.

“Ding-dang it, Delaney,” Dawn said. “What’s all the hol-lering about? You’re going to get the cops called on us again.”

Delaney came to a stop right in front of us, but kept bouncing on her toes as if she wanted to still be running. Her forehead was all crisscrossed with worry. “We got our school schedules in the mail,” she said, lifting her hand with the papers in them, “and they’re all messed up!”

“How do you know?” I asked.

Delaney paused and bit her lip. “Because I accidentally looked at everyone’s schedules after I opened the envelopes.”

She handed each of us a paper with our name at the top. “See?” she said, holding hers up and pointing. “We don’t have any classes together except one.”

It took me a while to find what she was talking about. My gaze hopped from my paper to the other two schedules, checking to see if any of the same classes were listed on all of them. Dawn saw it before I did.

“What in the blazes?” she exclaimed. “Cheer Squad?”

That’s when my eyes found it. Sure enough, all three of us were taking Cheer Squad at sixth period, the last class of the day.

“But . . . where’s Color Guard?” I asked.

“It’s not on there,” Delaney said. “It’s not on any of our schedules.”

Hardly any classes together? No Color Guard? I felt a swoopy sensation, as if I were still on the swing.

“You’re right, Delaney.” Dawn’s steely-eyed expression returned to her face. “This is an emergency.”