

CHAPTER ONE

Peaceful Protest

Delaney

I still say it was Dawn's fault that Christmas was almost ruined. She let that silly pageant take over everything.

Once she has her mind set on how things should be, she's as flexible as a mule in cement shoes. But she also has a way of getting all of us worked up, and before we know it, the three of us are stuck in a situation we can't get out of. Like quicksand.

After the horror of the Christmas pageant auditions and casting announcements, Dawn pouted all the way home and grumped all the way up the stairs to our room. As soon as we shut the door she started griping loudly.

"Angels! Can you believe that? Angels! Do I look like an angel to you?"

Darby and I shook our heads. When Dawn's angry, she can be kind of scary, so we always just agree with her. And truthfully, she didn't look all that angelic with her glaring eyes and all the crisscrossed lines on her brow. Even her hair looked redder.

"This whole thing is such a . . . a . . ." Dawn snapped her fingers, trying to think of the right word.

"A travesty," Darby said.

"A catastrophe," I said.

"More like an epic disgrace," Dawn said. "Those auditions were a total sham!"

We'd practiced long and hard to be the Three Wise Men at our church's annual pageant. Just that morning, we'd gotten up at the crack of dawn to practice our wise walk, which is not easy. At first we couldn't agree on what a wise walk looked like. We tried gliding, trudging, and marching. Darby even pointed out that in "The First Noel" a line goes, "Then entered in the wise men three, full reverently upon their knee," so we tried walking on our knees. But that hurt our kneecaps, and a harmful knee-walk doesn't seem, or look, very wise.

Finally we found the right walk — a slow tramp with our heads held up high so we could follow the big star

and look noble. We'd thought of everything, and we were the wisest-looking of all at the auditions, but instead we were cast as angels.

When we asked Mrs. Higginbotham if we did a good job, she said yes. We said, "But we didn't get to be Wise Men," and she said, "Of course not. Those roles are for boys."

And that was that. Until now.

"It's not right that Lucas, Adam, and Tommy get the parts just because they're boys," Darby said.

"Yeah, I mean, what century does she think she's in? Girls can be anything boys can be. Besides, the baby Jesus is actually a Baby Betsy doll," I said. "If she can be a he, why can't we?"

"Because Mrs. Higginbotham is not being fair," Dawn grumbled. She crossed her arms over her chest and plopped down on her bed.

I plopped down on my bed, too, but kept plopping. The next thing I knew, I was on my feet, jumping on the mattress. It felt good to get the nervousness out — until I accidentally bounced into the shelf between my bed and Dawn's. Books and cards and dominos tumbled everywhere.

"Doggone it, Delaney!" Dawn fussed at me.