

CHAPTER ONE

Back in the Bathrobe Again

December 15

Maybe it's just me, but I think it's hard to look like a wise man with a chicken sitting on your head.

Let me explain.

This time every year, my church does a Christmas program. It's always held on Christmas Eve and everyone in the community is invited. Well, this year, my mom's in charge of the program.

That should tell you right away that I'm in trouble.

Every time my mom plans a program, she wants me to be in it. Now, don't get me wrong—I don't mind being in a choir or a play sometimes. But I've worn every bathrobe I've had since I was

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four in a Christmas program.

At first, you get to be one of the shepherds. Not one who actually goes to see Baby Jesus, just one who gets to wear a bathrobe and sing in the shepherd-and-angel choir.

Then, when you're older, you get to be an important shepherd—you still wear your bathrobe, but they let you carry a stick. Or staff or cane or whatever they call it. And then you get to act out the Bible story. You walk up to Joseph and Mary (you hope they've stopped fighting about who gets to sit next to the manger) and kneel down to look at the plastic doll lying on the hay.

I guess the same thing happens to girls. My sister Kayla said, "If I have to wear a white choir robe and sing in the angel choir once more, I'm going to scream." That would have broken the "silent night," for sure.

"At least you don't have to wear the same thing you wear in the bathroom," I told her.

But she wanted to work her way up too. "I want to be an important angel. I want to announce good news to the shepherds. I want to wear angel wings!"

Finally, she got promoted to one of the angels who appear to the shepherds. Wings and everything. I guess the only thing left for girls after that

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is to be Mary and hold the baby. I know Kayla is working on it.

But for boys, the next big step is becoming a wise man. You know a wise man is more important than a shepherd for two reasons:

First, you can have as many shepherds as you need, but there can be only three wise men.

And second, you don't have to wear your bathrobe anymore. A wise man is so important, you get to wear your father's bathrobe.

I've never wanted to be Joseph. I mean, you just stand there. And if you're unlucky, they'll want you to hold the doll, and you'll have to, because it's supposed to be Baby Jesus.

Besides, you never know about Joseph and Mary. Sometimes the person in charge thinks little Josephs and Marys are cute. Then you end up with a Mary who holds Baby Jesus by one leg and tries to get in the manger herself.

Anyway, I've been a shepherd; I've been a wise man. This year, I told my mom I would be happy just to help behind the scenes. But, no, she had other plans for me.

We were having supper when she made the big announcement. "Well, we're going to do it. This year, the Christmas pageant is going to be different."

"How?" Kayla asked.

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“This year, we’re going to have a live Nativity scene. With real animals.”

“That’s great!” Alex shouted. He’s my brother. “But what’s a nativity?” He’s only seven.

“Nativity [nuh-tiv-it-tee],” Mom corrected him. “Some people call it a crèche [cresh]. It’s a scene showing Baby Jesus in the manger. And we’ll have shepherds with real sheep, a real donkey, and maybe a cow.”

Dad’s eyebrows went up. “Does Mrs. Hopkins know about this? You know how she feels about the manger.”

Mom sounded a little nervous. “Well, not yet. But the pastor and the church board approved it.”

Dad shook his head, but he was smiling. I thought a live Nativity sounded like a good idea.

That was before I found out about the chicken.

The next afternoon after school, everyone who wanted to be (or whose parents wanted them to be) in the Christmas program met at the church. When we drove up, some of the church people were building the stable in the grass near one corner of the parking lot.

“It may not look like Bethlehem yet,” Pastor Vargas said, “but it will. There seems to be a lot of interest in the program this year. The fellowship hall is filling up fast.”

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A car pulled up behind us while they were talking. Mrs. Hopkins wasted no time getting out and marching over. She glared at the stable. "This is what you'll use to protect the manger?"

Mom spoke softly. "This is what we'll use to tell the story of Jesus' birth. The manger will be a big part of it."

"You do realize what our manger is worth, don't you? My great-grandmother bought it in Bethlehem more than eighty years ago." Mom and Pastor Vargas nodded. They had heard the story many times. "I've just brought it back from the furniture shop. I had them add another coat of varnish to protect it." She lifted the manger, wrapped in a heavy black blanket, out of her back seat and handed it to Mom.

"When Mrs. Abernathy directed the Christmas programs, we never had this kind of program. We always had the Nativity scene inside the church, like God intended."

"Now, Mrs. Hopkins," Pastor Vargas said, "God allowed the first Nativity to happen in a stable. I think it will be acceptable to have ours outdoors as well. Is your husband bringing the hay?"

Mrs. Hopkins just frowned. "Yes. He should be here by dark. I have spoken against the idea of using our manger for this program. But I have not

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been listened to. Mark my words—we will all regret this mistake.”

She stomped off and drove away. Mom shook her head. “Don’t worry about it,” Pastor Vargas said. “Why don’t you leave the manger here for now? I want to see how it fits in when the stable is done.” He set the manger against the back wall.

We headed for the fellowship hall, where all the kids were supposed to meet. But when we opened the door, it sounded like a zoo!

Through all the barking, meowing, clucking, and shouting, I counted eight dogs, three cats, two chickens, a rabbit, and a goose. Mom ran right out into middle of it all. “Please, everyone, grab your pet and sit down. Sit!” she shouted. Finally, it started to quiet down.

Luke came in behind us. Luke’s my good friend from Thunder Mountain Camp.* His family moved to our town this fall. We sat on the side away from most of the animals. “I thought this was a Christmas program, not a pet show,” he said. “What’s going on?”

Before I could answer, Mom spoke up. “I’m glad to see so many of you here today. I am sorry that

* You can read about the adventure Zack and Luke had at Thunder Mountain Camp in the book *Detective Zack and the Mystery at Thunder Mountain*.

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someone gave you the idea you should bring your animals.” She glared at my brother, Alex. He tried to hide behind a German shepherd.

“We are having animals in our program this year,” she said, “but only animals from the story. There will be a donkey, a cow, and two sheep. That’s all. No other animals.”

“But can’t we have one dog?” a little girl asked. “Bobo wants to be in the program so bad.” She looked like she was going to cry. Bobo didn’t look too happy either.

“I’m sorry,” Mom answered, “only Bible animals. We’ll be having the program out by the parking lot. You probably saw church members there building our Christmas stable. First, we need to find our shepherds.”

Luke and I sat and waited while Mom decided who would be shepherds and angels and which lucky ones would be Joseph and Mary. While we waited, we watched Bobo staring at a white cat and licking his lips. The white cat wasn’t afraid. It was too busy staring at the rabbit and licking its whiskers.

“This is asking for trouble,” Luke warned in a whisper.

I’ll say this about Luke. When he’s right, he’s right.

