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“We Four Kings: A Christmas Whodunit”

by

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SYNOPSIS

It's the night of the long-awaited Christmas pageant! This time with a "more Biblically-accurate" rendition of the Magi's arrival. But suddenly, the wise men's gifts have disappeared and have been replaced with chaos and confusion. Will the cast find the gifts or maybe something of more value to present to the baby King?

This entertaining, full-length Christmas play will work as your church's Christmas pageant or for a dinner theater.

CAST

Will- Male, approx 50's. A staff pastor and the director of this year's pageant. (He is the "Wise Man" from Away From a Manger.)

Aaron- Male, approx late 20's. He was suggested to substitute as "Joseph" and now is eager to be in this year's pageant- for personal reasons.

Goldie- Female, approx 50's. Plays a "wise man." The church's interior decorator, she is also Will's colleague, and they disagree on the aesthetics of church décor.

Frank- Male, approx 30's or 40's. Plays a "wise man". A wanna-be-professional singer with high aspirations. He is assigned a vocal solo that is sure to humiliate him. (Actor must be able to sing)

Mariah- Female, approx 20's. Plays a "wise man". New to the Christmas story, she candidly expresses her dislike of the "morbid" details.

Jade- Female, approx Teens/early 20's. Plays a "wise man". A theater student who believes she can do a better job writing and directing the show.

Cameron- Male, teens. Plays the Camel. A National Honor Student applicant looking to complete his service hours, he is dismayed at his role and the general quality of the production.

Pam- Adult female. Nursery Director who discovers the gifts' location.

Actor 9- Female, prepared to play a variety of comedic roles:

Aliyah - A musical theater lyricist and Jade's college roommate

Sadie - Mariah's younger sister

Sasha - Aaron's younger sister

Jill - Cameron's cousin

Tilly - a skilled seamstress and a good friend of Goldie's

Lynette - Frank's supportive wife

Offstage voice- a child who can sound like a screaming toddler ("Little Joshy").

SET

Keep it simple. The only thing really needed is a small manger scene, where Aaron sits. Ideally, this would be on a platform that can be rolled onto the stage. If you do not have that capability, rather than 'rolling' on a platform, simply have your stage crew quickly set up a manger scene; then have Aaron quickly get in place before the Wise Men reach the manger.

PROPS

Three gift containers wrapped in (if possible) the same material as the wise men's tunics, and decorated with stick-on jewels

Notebook on clipboard

Stuffed animal

Cell phone

4-5 Large full-looking boxes

Several stereotypical Bible-era props

Muffin for Mariah to eat

Laptop computer

Small plastic cup filled with Goldfish crackers

Large shopping bag containing several body wash/lotion bottles

Candles (for table)

Folded pair of men's jeans and t-shirt

Sewing kit, Needle and Thread

COSTUMES

Will- casual-dress pants and collared shirt. Carries a clipboard and a cell phone.

Aaron- casual clothes.

Goldie- Black clothes covered by a gaudy gold satin robe/tunic and turban.

Frank- Black clothes covered by a gaudy red satin robe/tunic and turban.

Mariah-Black clothes covered by a gaudy purple satin robe/tunic and turban.

Jade-Black clothes covered by a gaudy green satin robe/tunic and turban.

Cameron- camel costume. While the costume should make it clear that he is a "camel", it's okay if it looks over-the-top, ridiculous. There should be a 'hump' on his back, under his shirt. This can be accomplished with a small pillow.

TIME

60 minutes (Not including intermissions) / 90 minutes (Including intermissions)

ACT BREAKDOWN

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4 (6 Possible Endings - only one will be performed at each performance)

ACT 5-Jade Culprit

ACT 6-Mariah Culprit

ACT 7-Aaron Culprit

ACT 8-Cameron Culprit

ACT 9-Goldie Culprit

ACT10-Frank Culprit

PERFORMANCE SUGGESTIONS:

This script is designed to fit with and around a dinner event. While the script can be adjusted (for instance, combining Acts 2 and 3, or lengthening or omitting the "questions from the audience" improvisation portion from the end of Act 3, etc.), here is our recommendation for use of this script:

As guests arrive and find seats, actors mingle. Actors start the evening in character (and in costume), revealing little information except that they are in a Christmas pageant and some background as to how they feel about their role, etc. Of course, nothing should be said about the "crime" that is to take place later. During this time, you might have an event coordinator/facilitator performing hosting services, while Will (in character) rushes around trying to "get people seated before dress rehearsal starts".

Perform Act 1.

Serve salad course. During this time, actors can either sit among guests, still entirely in character and costume (this option is encouraged if you have strong actors) or can stay in a backstage location.

Perform Act 2.

Serve the main course. During Act 2, some of the actors were interrogated for hiding the wise men's gifts. If actors mingle with guests after Act 2, keep in mind that the actors already interrogated may be singled out by guests for questioning. Prepare your actors how to respond.

Perform Act 3

Afterwards, all actors go to a backstage location, with the possible exception of Will.

Facilitator takes an audience vote as to which character they believe committed the "crime." This can be taken via a show of hands or a secret ballot. Consider your specific audience before deciding how to collect votes. You also might consider whether or not you are performing the script multiple nights, in which case you will have some returning guests voting. It is our suggestion that if you are performing this multiple nights be sure to perform a different ending each evening, even if the audience votes on the same culprit each night. This would require a secret ballot. The facilitator gives the results to Will. In the case of a tie, Will should decide which of the final scenes to perform.

Serve the dessert course. While guests are eating dessert, actors review and prepare the ending chosen by the audience.

Perform the final scene.

Facilitator (possibly with help from Will) dismisses guests.

ACT I

Recording or offstage voice "In the Bleak Midwinter" carol:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb
If I were a wise man, I would do my part
But what I can, I give Him
Give my heart.

Will: Wise men!

Will clears his throat with significance.

Will: "If I were a wise man", that's your cue!

Silence.

Will: Wise Men!

Will claps his hands.

Will: MAGI FROM THE EAST!

Enter Cameron, wearing a camel costume.

Cameron: They're in the back. They can't find their gifts.

Will: Their gifts?

Cameron: The gold and myrrh and—you know, the other one.

Will: The "other one"? The "other one"? This is exactly what I've been saying for years. Children these days are not thoroughly educated in the Scriptures. Frankincense was an important incense, a consecrated incense, used in the Temple. It represents holiness, it represents purity of sacrifice—it represents the name of God Himself. Frankincense is—

Cameron: *(interrupting)* It's an essential oil.

Will: Excuse me?

Cameron: I'll get the wise men.

Cameron exits offstage.

Frank, Goldie, Mariah, and Jade enter from the opposite direction. All four are in satin robes and turbans.

Will: Wise men, nice of you to stop by.

Jade: Sorry. Someone moved our gifts.

Frank: Again.

Will: *(sighing)* Goldie, where are the gifts?

Goldie: Why are you asking me? You're the director...?

Will: Which means I'm in charge of theology and artistic integration. You're the church's interior decorator. You know where everything is.

Goldie: I can't know where everything is if I'm on stage. Furthermore, if I were in charge of props, I would never have used that fabric for the magi's gifts. Those colors are positively garish.

Cameron re-enters, carrying three brightly colored satin-covered containers.

Cameron: Found the gifts.

Will: Excellent! Let's keep them where they belong, shall we?

Cameron crosses to the Wise Men and hands the gifts to Mariah, Jade, and Goldie. Frank is without a present.

Goldie: Our industrious National Honor Society guy. What would we do without you?

Cameron: Not an NHS member yet. If I was, my service hours would be done, and I wouldn't be wearing a camel suit.

Goldie: That's right, your father did say you needed more hours volunteering. He said you'd be excited to be part of the pageant.

Cameron: *(aside)* "Excited" is not exactly the word I'd use.

Will: Goldie, I'm putting you in charge of the gifts. Make sure they don't walk off again.

Goldie: Yes sir.

Will: I'll just make a note...

Will begins scribbling in his notebook, creating a brief downtime for the actors.

Mariah: *(aside, to other actors)* Can someone fill me in? Why are there four of us?

Jade: What do you mean?

Mariah: Everyone knows there's three wise men.

Jade: That's a myth. The Bible mentions three gifts, but there could have been any number of wise men.

Frank: Is that why I don't have a gift? I feel a little odd being the only wise man without a gift.

Cameron: You feel odd? Can we talk about this costume?

Jade: *(to Frank)* Three gifts. Only three. Pastor Will wants to make sure we're as Biblically accurate as possible.

Frank: *(sarcastically)* Shocker.

Jade: Without crowding the stage, that is. Although personally, I would go with five. Odd numbers look better.

Mariah: Wait. Seriously? Three wise men, that's not in the Bible?

Cameron: Didn't you attend Pastor Will's Sunday School series "Christmas Deceptions and Misconceptions"?

Goldie: *(to Mariah)* Honestly, I'm surprised he's letting women dress up as wise men. But trying to get men to participate in the Christmas pageant is... *(slight pause)* I digress.

Jade: *(to Mariah, condescendingly)* Let me guess, you think the wise men came right up to the stable...with the shepherds.

Mariah: Well, I thought the shepherds were more in the background, you know, holding the sheep away from the baby.

Jade: *(rolling her eyes)* The wise men came, like, two years after Jesus' birth. That's why Church tradition celebrates Epiphany in January, after Christmas.

Mariah: E-piff-a-what?

Cameron: Epiphany. The coming of the wise men. I mean, it took them awhile to get there. *(Indicating his costume)* We aren't exactly known for our speed.

Jade: Right. About two years. That's why King Herod was killing all the babies up through two years old.

Mariah: *(horrified)* Killing babies?!

Jade: Have you ever read the Christmas story?

Cameron: *(pointing at Mariah's container)* Do you even know what myrrh is?

Mariah: It's perfume. Expensive perfume.

Jade: From tree sap. Used for anointing dead bodies.

Mariah: *(gasps)* Dead bodies??

Jade: Well, yeah. You know that line in the We Three Kings verse, "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom..."

Frank: *(singing)* "Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb."

Mariah: Ewww! Why are you telling me these terrible things?

Jade: Acting 101. It's important to fully understand your character's motivation. *(To Frank)* You have a really nice voice.

Frank: Thank you.

Jade: Have you ever auditioned for the Easter cantatas? You'd be perfect.

Frank: Well, there aren't really auditions, per se.

Jade: Then how do they cast the soloists?

Frank: Everyone knows that the Christmas pageant is basically the Easter audition.

Mariah: I didn't know that.

Cameron: Mariah, there seems to be a lot that you don't know.

Will: *(claps hands)* All right, Wise Men enter stage right...dark stage, instrumental music begins...strobe light...star projected on the left. All this, of course, when the AV techs arrive, and...you may proceed.

Silently, Cameron, Goldie, Frank, Mariah, and Jade cross the stage, taking steps in slow motion. Obviously, without sound and light effects, this appears quite comical; Will does not seem to notice.

Will: Wise Men exit stage left...music reaches crescendo and falls...star fades, lights wash to warm tones, it's now morning. Music advances to track 5. Wise Men enter stage left.

Silently, Cameron, Goldie, Frank, Mariah, and Jade again cross the stage in the other direction, taking the same slow, exaggerated steps.

Will: Then we roll in the platform with the child Jesus and his mother, Mary...
*As the **Wise Men** and **Cameron** dressed as the camel reach center stage, a platform is slowly wheeled in. On the platform, **Aaron** is sitting alone, holding a stuffed animal and looking dramatically off into the distance. Initially, **Will** does not notice the fact that **Aaron** has replaced **Mary**, though everyone else does.*

Will: "And as they came into the house and saw the child with Mary his mother, they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasure boxes and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."
Wise men, keep moving, you need to get right up to Jesus and his mother—

*Will finally notices **Aaron** on the platform and stops short.*

Will: *(staring directly at **Aaron**)* Aaron.

Mariah: Wait. *(To **Jade**)* I know that's wrong.

Will: Where's Mary?

Aaron: She can't make it.

Will: The performance is tonight!

He stands up with a cell phone in hand, preparing to call.

Will: Where is she?

Aaron: The hospital. She's in labor.

Cameron: Well, that's ironic.

Will: I suppose that does change things. So we don't have a Mary and we don't have a baby Jesus.

Aaron: Actually, she said I could bring Joshy and maybe play Joseph.

Will: *(ignoring the comment about **Aaron** playing **Joseph**)* We can still use Josh. Perfect. Where is he?

Aaron: Crying for his mom in the nursery. But don't worry. *(Indicating himself)* He loves his Uncle Aaron.

Mariah: Josh is almost three. How can he be the baby Jesus?

Jade: Biblical accuracy. Remember? Jesus wasn't a baby anymore.

Joshy: *(offstage voice)* MOMMMMMYYYYYYYY! I WANT MOMMMMMYYYYYYYY! I WANT TO GO HO-OOOME!!!!

Frank: We're using a toddler. *(Sarcastically)* I can't see anything going wrong there.

Aaron: I'm supposed to put him down for his nap once I finish my scene.

Will: You don't have a scene. You can't play Mary.

Aaron: Well, Joseph—

Will: No.

Aaron: I just thought it would be fun to be part of the pageant this year. Maybe Mariah could play Mary—

Joshy: *(offstage voice)* MOMMMMMYYYYYYYY!

Aaron: I should— *(jerks his head in the direction of the nursery)*

Will: Please.

Aaron exits.

Will: We need Mary. The Greek text clearly says, *paidion meta Maria autos meter*,¹ the child and his mother.

Mariah: Well, I don't know Greek, but I could be Mary. You know, instead of holding burial ointment...

Frank: Perfect. Then I could hold the myrrh.

Goldie: Honestly, Will. You're down an actor—it's the only reasonable thing to do. Put Mariah in and let Aaron go home.

Jade: The stage would look better with an odd number.

Will: Everyone, quiet. I'll figure out what to do about Mary and Jesus during our break. Let's move on to the next scene.

Frank: Um...about that...

Will: Frank, this is your solo.

Frank: I really don't feel comfortable—

¹"pie-DEE-on meh-TAH Maria au-TOS MA'-täre"

Will: Nonsense. You sing solos in church all the time. Don't you have a master's degree in vocal music or something?

Frank: I have...I have a really scratchy throat today. Might be coming down with something.

Pause. Will isn't buying it.

Frank: *(with raspy voice)* I hear diphtheria is going around.

Frank fakes a cough, not very convincingly. He looks at Jade.

Frank: *(to Jade)* I thought maybe you could do the song.

Jade: Nice try. But no. It's not in my character's motivation.

Frank: Plus, there's no music. I need the music, so I know when to start singing.

Cameron: If the diphtheria goes away, that is.

Will: *(to Frank, a little impatient)* The musicians are coming at 5. Just run through it quickly now so the other actors can hear their cues.

Frank: *(reluctantly)* Okay.

Sings both stanzas to the tune of "We Three Kings" verses, completely straight-faced:

I have had a horrible dream
Herod's plans are not what they seem.
Find Messiah, make him di-ie—a
Terrible, evil scheme!
We will not be part of his play,
There is one solution today,
Plans of travel, be unraveled
Go home a different way.
Will stands up and begins to slow-clap.

Will: Excellent! Well done, Frank. A few notes on your delivery...

Frank moves downstage and confers with Will.

Cameron: *(in disbelief)* Wow.

Mariah: I am never singing "We Three Kings" again. First the bleeding and dying, and now this?

Goldie: *(dryly)* No, that's not part of the real song. That's a Pastor Will classic right there.

Cameron: Those are pretty much the worst lyrics in the history of songwriting.

Goldie: Artistic excellence is not exactly a priority for Will. We have had lots of discussions about this during church staff meetings. He never listens to me.

Aaron re-enters. Frank returns to his place on stage; Will continues to make notes, muttering to himself.

Aaron: What'd I miss?

Frank: *(shakes his head)* Nothing worth repeating.

Cameron: *(with dread)* But we are supposed to repeat it—Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday.

Aaron: I didn't think the pageant was usually this—

Cameron: Awful?

Mariah: Morbid?

Frank: Humiliating?

Goldie: Aesthetically unpleasant?

Jade: Untimely? *(The others look at her for an explanation)* Think about it. This show ought to run during Epiphany, not Christmas.

Aaron: I was going to say "unfinished". Isn't the show tonight? Like, in a couple hours?

Cameron: No one wants to do this show.

Aaron: I want to do it. I think it's great.

Frank: *(ignoring Aaron)* They should just cancel it.

Jade: With some better direction, I think we still could have a good show. I've been taking this directing class and—

Goldie: *(interrupting)* Pastor Will's been working on this pageant for the last two years. He won't cancel under any circumstance. *(Pause, reconsidering)* Maybe the Rapture.

Will: *(clapping his hands)* All right, Wise Men, back in position. Let's take the scene again. Sound cue, track 4.

Aaron: Pastor Will, I had an idea for Joseph—

Will: *(not even looking up)* No.
Aaron: But—
Will: *(still not looking up from his notes)* No.

Aaron: *(to the others)* Fine. I'll just check on Joshy.

*Aaron exits; the **Wise Men** and **Cameron** return to Stage Right.*

Will: All right, we have the wise men, we have the camel, we have the gifts. Westward leading, start proceeding.

*Suddenly **Aaron** bursts back in stage left.*

Aaron: Where's Joshy?

Will: What do you mean? Isn't he in the nursery?

Aaron: He's not there. He must have broken out of the pack 'n play again.

***Will's** next line should be used **only** if performing as a sequel to "Away from a Manger".*

Will: Again? Jesus is missing again?

Goldie: Let's go. Everyone split up.

***Aaron**, **Goldie**, and **Frank** run off stage left; **Mariah**, **Jade**, and **Cameron** run off stage right. The **Wise Men** carry their containers with them. **Will** hurries down the center to the back of the auditorium.*

The following lines are spoken simultaneously:

Aaron: Mary's going to kill me if she hears this. I don't think she's ever let the kid out of her sight before. No, seriously, I don't think she ever has. Can't you tell? *(Etc.)*

Goldie: You can't just leave a two-year-old alone in a room like that. This ought to be a wakeup call to Will and his harebrained ideas. Putting a toddler in a Christmas pageant? A pageant that runs three nights in a row, after his bedtime? Ridiculous. *(Etc.)*

Frank: First grade room, check. Second grade room, check. Third grade room, check. Fourth grade room, check. Janitor's closet, check. Fifth grade room, check. Hey, Aaron, this kid's a regular Houdini. *(Etc.)*

Mariah: *(repeatedly)* JO-SHY!

Jade: This is what happens with such a disorganized production. This never would have happened if we had an actual director here. Even I could do better than this. *(Etc.)*

Cameron: Okay, Joshy, if you're playing hide and seek, we give up! We're totally stumped! You win! Come on out, buddy! Hey, guess what? I know where the kitchen crew keeps the ice cream sandwiches! *(Etc.)*

After a moment of general chaos, Will starts back down the aisle.

Will: All right, everyone, come on back. He's safe and sound, back in his pack 'n play.

*The others gradually re-enter. The **Wise Men** are no longer carrying their gifts.*

Will: He was at the double doors, staring at the cars...probably watching for autos meter.

Aaron: More likely watching for big-eos truck-eos.

Goldie: Praise the Lord he didn't make it to the parking lot.

Will: Well, the Nursery Director's on her way in. I put on a Veggie Tale and told him to stay put until then.

Will recollects his papers.

Will: So...we have the wise men, we have the camel, we...don't have the gifts. Wise men, where are your gifts?

*The **Wise Men, Cameron, and Aaron** look at each other.*

Jade: I put mine by the door when we went looking for Josh. Didn't you?

Frank: That's what I did.

Mariah: Me too. I wasn't going to hold onto that death lotion any longer than I had to.

Jade: *(to **Mariah**)* You know there's not actually any myrrh in there, right? It's a cardboard box.

Will: *(almost menacing)* GOL-DIE! I told you, you were in charge of the gifts!

Goldie: Well, since no one was in charge of the child, I rearranged my priorities.

Will: Are you sure they're not out by the door?

Goldie: William, those color monstrosities stand out a mile. Trust me, they're not there. *(Pause)* But this may be an opportunity to alter the color scheme.

Will: Aaron? Cameron?

Cameron: *(hands up)* Don't look at me. I'm not a wise man.

Aaron: I'm not even in this show...yet.

Will: Well, someone must have picked them up and put them somewhere. Think, people, think.

The six characters on stage look at each other, shrugging. No one says a word.

Will: If this is someone's idea of a joke, it's not funny.

Silence.

Will: So, we simply have no gifts to give Jesus.

Mariah: *(aside)* I'm not sure he really wanted myrrh.

Will: *(angrily)* The gifts speak of Christ's role as God, as King, and as Atonement. In our pageant, they are to represent the giving of our hearts in worship to the newborn King.

Silence.

Will: In the absence of a response, we're going to check the prop room, we're going to check the nursery, we're going to check every room in this building for those gifts. And when we find them, there will be an hour of reckoning.

ACT II

Lights up. There are several large, open boxes Stage Left, which presumably contain props and other costume items. There are a few more of these boxes scattered across the stage, open as if someone has been digging through them. A few stereotypical Bible-era props (i.e. plastic Roman soldier helmet, fake beards, etc.) are visible hanging out of the boxes or on the floor.

Will stands Stage Left, near the majority of the prop boxes. Goldie, Frank, Mariah, Jade, Aaron, and Cameron are positioned Stage Right, some standing, and others seated on the platform or on a box. Aaron, Mariah, and Cameron should be playing with and/or wearing particularly silly-looking items from the boxes, which is discontinued when the questioning begins.

Will: There we have it. We've turned the prop room upside down and clearly the Magi's gifts are not there.

Jade: So...what are you saying?

Will: This is the second time today the gifts' whereabouts have been in question. It seems this mishap no longer qualifies as a sin of omission, but rather of commission. *(Blank looks)* I'll be frank. I believe one of you misplaced them on purpose.

Frank: I'm Frank. *(All turn to look at him. He throws his hands up in defense)* But I don't know where the gifts went.

Will: As I recall, Aaron came in looking for little Joshy. Then all six of you went into the church hallway to search and took the gifts with you. It's doubtful anyone else came this way, but if they did, we would have seen them with the gifts. That leaves us with the conclusion that one of you did something with them.

Jade: Pastor Will, I get that this is important to you. But with a few hours to curtain, we really should substitute some other containers and get on with rehearsal.

Will: The containers themselves are irrelevant. This is about cleansing the camp.

Mariah: I thought we had a custodian for that.

Will: That is, removing all sin from among us. One of you is hiding something, and we can't harbor deceit and expect God to be pleased with our offering tonight. Scripture says therefore to confess your faults and pray for one another, that ye may be healed. *(Pause; then, brightly)* So! Who's first?

Goldie: *(a little incredulous)* First to confess our faults?

Will: Just any faults that pertain to the missing gifts, if you please.

Goldie: Well, in that case, I'll go first. I confess that I have been harboring thoughts about how tacky those boxes are.

Will: That wasn't exactly what I meant...

Goldie: They're gaudy and cheap. And they bring out the ugly green undertones of the carpet.

Will: Those are the colors that indicated status and royalty in New Testament times.

Goldie: In today's time, they indicate a two-year-old's birthday party.

Cameron: *(a little tongue-in-cheek)* So...perfect for visiting the toddler Jesus, then.

Will: Any chance you disposed of the gifts so that you could replace them with beige and burgundy?

Goldie: Actually, I was thinking of a taupe brocade. I have a bolt in my office left over from the men's event last month—oh, and I have a smoked paprika that would offset the fabric of that awful Camel's head. *(She notices the others' expressions)* Now what?

Jade: You're saying you got rid of the gifts?

Goldie: What? Don't be ridiculous.

Frank: Well, it does sound pretty convenient that you already have replacement fabric in your office.

Goldie: Young man, the church pays me to decorate. I'd say it's "pretty convenient" that I'm resourceful enough to save leftover fabric for another use.

Frank: I don't know. Makes sense to me. You could throw out the gifts we've been using, then we'd need to replace them in time for the show tonight... so you could come forward with your "resourcefulness" and create new ones that fit your color scheme.

Goldie: Excuse me? First, I don't appreciate your audacity, and second I would never dream of switching out the props without switching out the costumes too.

Cameron starts laughing.

Frank: What?

Cameron: Her story checks out, that's all. And I'm thinking maybe yours doesn't.

Frank: My "story"? I don't have a story.

Cameron: Except you're the actor who most wants to escape tonight's performance.

Frank: What makes you say that?

Cameron: I don't know, but sounds like your throat's a lot better. Miraculous recovery, huh?

Pause.

Frank: Ummm...

Cameron: What's that, Frank? You can't wait to sing your solo?

Frank: Uhhh...

Cameron: Speak up, Frank, we can't hear you.

Frank: Well, would you want to sing that terrib— *(about to say "terrible," he quickly stops himself)* that TERR-IFIC reprise? As a solo?

Will: What's wrong with the reprise?

Pause.

Will: What's wrong with the reprise?

Jade: Since we're cleansing the camp and all...that reprise is terrible. Frank doesn't want to be embarrassed.

Will: Embarrassed? Frank, are you embarrassed to sing this?

Frank: *(reluctantly)* Yes. *(More definitively)* Yes. When you promised me an "original piece", this was NOT what I expected.

Cameron: Those lyrics sure won't earn you any points toward Easter.

Jade: But you know, I've been taking this "songwriting for theatre" class and I think I can fix it.

Mariah: Of course you can.

Jade: What do you mean?

Mariah: You and all your theater classes. You think you can direct this show better than Pastor Will.

Jade: Who asked you?

Mariah: No one asked me anything. It's just you've been criticizing us all day.

Jade: That's not fair. I'm offering constructive criticism.

Pause.

Jade: And let's be honest, this show could use some help.

Will: So what was your plan? Hide the gifts, then hold them captive until you're able to fix the show?

Jade: That's ridiculous. And at least I want to fix the show. Frank wants to cancel it altogether.

Frank: You wanted to postpone it until Epiphany!

Will stops in his tracks.

Will: Jade? Is this true?

Jade: Well, yeah, I mean, if we're talking about the wise men...

Will: Superior thinking! Folks, this is exactly the kind of theological integration we want to promote in our church.

Jade smirks. The others groan silently.

Will: I agree, Jade, why would we have a pageant about the Magi at Christmas? *(He shakes his head sadly)* Because the church was reserved for an elder's retreat on Epiphany, that's why.

Goldie: I guess one can't have everything.

Will: *(abruptly)* But what we CAN have is a pageant which honors God with our gifts.

Jade: That's what I'm trying to do, when I make suggestions—

Will: No no. You know what gifts I'm talking about. And one of you even knows where they are. *(Sighs)* Everyone take five. We'll resume our investigation momentarily.

ACT III

All actors except Mariah and Will sit on the stage. Will enters from behind the audience.

Will: Is everyone here?

Mariah enters from Stage Right, eating a muffin.

Mariah: Here.

Cameron: I'm starving. Where did you get the muffin?

Mariah: I was looking for the gifts in the kitchen.

Goldie: I believe those are for the newcomers' luncheon after the service on Sunday.

Mariah: *(stuffing the rest of the muffin in her mouth)* I'm still pretty new to the church.

Jade: Clearly.

Mariah: What does that mean?

Jade: It's just...you barely know the Christmas story.

Mariah: Who are you, the theology police? I know about the baby in the manger. Excuse me if I was unaware that the gifts for the newborn king included formaldehyde.

Jade: Myrrh.

Mariah: Whatever. How could any sane person give that as a gift? It's like a death wish.

Cameron: It wasn't a death wish. It just foreshadowed Jesus' death on the cross, as a sacrifice.

Mariah: But it's such a mean gift. It's like Sleeping Beauty where all the fairies are giving the baby nice presents, and then the bad fairy's like *(dramatic voice)* "Aha! You will prick your finger on a spindle and die!"

The others look at each other, incredulous.

Will: Mariah, this is not a fairy tale. This is the holy Word of God.

Mariah: I know that. I just didn't know I was going to be the bad fairy. *(Correcting herself)* I mean, wise man.

Goldie: There's no "bad" wise men, Mariah. *(Pause)* Just bad wise men costumes. But I digress.

Cameron: *(to Mariah)* So if you had known, you probably wouldn't have volunteered to be in the show, huh?

Mariah: *(without thinking)* Definitely not.

Will: Might this lead you to take some unrighteous action to cancel the pageant?

Mariah: I didn't say that.

Will: Did you get rid of the gifts?

Mariah: No, of course not.

Cameron: Maybe she hid them in the kitchen. I'll check.

Goldie: *(to Cameron)* Sit down. Those muffins are for the newcomers.

Cameron: I'm new—

Goldie: Your father has been an elder for the past 20 years.

Cameron: I'm starving.

Will: *(to Cameron)* Are you hungry or do you just want to get out of here?

Cameron: Um-- both?

Will: *(slowly, thinking)* You found the gifts. Earlier when they went missing, you found them.

Cameron: That's right. I did find them. I think that eliminates me as a suspect.

Goldie: Wait just a minute. Maybe you didn't find the presents. Maybe you just knew where they were.

Frank: Yeah. Maybe this is the second time you've stolen Jesus' gifts.

Cameron: Why would I steal from Jesus?!

Jade: That is a pretty awful costume.

Mariah: The criticism continues.

Jade: Constructive criticism. And Goldie agrees with me.

Goldie: Don't bring me into this. *(Pause)* But yes, of course I do.

Jade: *(to Cameron)* I remember you not being super excited to wear it.

Cameron: Truth? I'd rather sing Frank's awful solo than wear this thing.

Frank: Let's trade.

Cameron: Seriously?

Frank: Nahh...that costume is pretty bad.

Will: Enough! *(To Cameron)* Did you take the gifts?

Cameron: No! Listen, I don't like this show, I don't like the songs, I really don't like the costume. I wish I'd never volunteered for this. But I'm not dumb enough to steal from Jesus!

Goldie: I think everyone should just calm down. No one is claiming that anyone stole from Jesus. I don't think that's even possible.

Will: It absolutely is possible! This whole production—our worship, our celebration, these are OUR gifts to Jesus. Anyone who stands in the way of the show is stealing from Jesus.

Aaron: I'm sure Jesus would appreciate team unity as a gift, too.

Will: You think this is funny?

Aaron: No. But as a third party, I would like to point out—

Will: Third party?

Aaron: Well, technically I'm not part of the show.

Frank: Yet.

Mariah: Maybe Jade could write you a part.

Frank: Maybe you're offended that Pastor Will won't let you be in the show. Even though your sister recommended you.

Aaron: What are you saying?

Frank: I don't know. Just that, sometimes offended people do things to get revenge.

Aaron: Serious? You think I want to be in the show SO much that I'm going to try to cancel it? What sense does that make?

Will: You did seem unusually intent on filling in for Mary.

Aaron: *(correcting)* Joseph.

Will: We can't have a Joseph without a Mary!

Aaron: Well, I'm still waiting for you to find one.

Will: I've been a little busy.

Aaron: How about Mariah?

Will: You keep suggesting Mariah. Why Mariah?

Aaron: Mary should be played by someone who's single, that's all.

All characters look at Aaron.

Aaron: I'm just saying.

Awkward pause.

Aaron: Mariah is single. Mary was single.

Jade: No. She was married to Joseph.

Aaron: Right. That's what I meant. If you wanted me to play Joseph it might be good to get a single Mary so...so that we could both be single.

Jade: For real? You wanted to be in the pageant to meet girls?

Aaron: No! Just Mariah. I mean, Mariah IS a girl— I mean, a lady—

Mariah looks like a deer caught in headlights. The others try to keep from laughing.

Frank: Now it all makes sense.

Aaron: *(hurriedly)* But more importantly, I wanted to be part of the pageant so that I could...so that I could—

Will: Honor God with your gift of acting?

Aaron: Exactly.

Will: Have you ever acted before?

Aaron: No.

Will: Here's a question. If Mariah plays Mary, will the gifts miraculously re-appear?

Aaron: *(confused)* I don't think so.

Will: Let's think about this. The presents disappeared after YOU said Joshy was missing. Did you possibly stage his disappearance?

Aaron: What??

Will: Did you attempt to use your nephew in hopes of winning Mariah?

Aaron: What are you talking about? No way.

Will: Well, it seems we're at an impasse. No one is coming forward with the gifts.

Jade: We can just use other boxes.

Will: *(angrily)* And those could "mysteriously disappear" right before the performance too. *(Calming down)* Listen, I'm not going to force anyone to be part of this pageant. If you don't want to be in the performance, raise your hand.

All actors raise their hand, except Aaron.

Aaron: I'll still do it. I mean...if you have a Mary.

Aaron looks at Mariah.

Mariah: My hand is up.

Will: This production may not be perfect. But there is a large audience on its way, and we have a God-ordained obligation to present a Biblically accurate Christmas--er--Epiphany pageant.

Will looks out into the audience, shielding his eyes as the lights brighten.

Will: Look, a few are here already. *(To the audience)* Do you want to see this show?

Audience member: YES!

Will: Then I'm going to need your help. Our gifts for Jesus are still missing. Who has a question to help further our investigation? You may ask any of these actors here, and they will answer honestly...as they fully understand that God is their witness.

Will facilitates 5-6 questions from the audience; characters improvise their responses.

Will: *(to audience)* Thank you. *(To suspects)* Is anyone ready to confess now?

Silence.

Will: *(throwing his hands up)* Fine. Fine. I'll call the church office and let them know that the performance will be canceled. Then I can come back here and collect the costumes and props from everyone.

Pause.

Goldie: Pastor Will, you don't have to collect the costumes... just let me tweak them.

Jade: Let me fix some of the dialogue.

Cameron: Maybe the wise men don't really need a camel.

Frank: Or a reprise.

Mariah: Could you just let me carry the gold?

Aaron: Or just have her play Mary?

Will: No! No, no, and no! *(Shakes his head)* I see we need a sermon series on Biblical submission to authority. I'm going to seek additional counsel from my congregation— and you six are dismissed until further notice.

ACT IV: Jade is the Culprit

Jade is alone on stage. Enter Aliyah.

Aliyah: *(singsong voice)* Knock-kno-ock!

Jade: Oh my goodness. You came!

Aliyah: Of course I came. An hour and a half drive is nothing when we've got a *(drifts into dramatic sing-song again)* musical theatre CRI-sis on our hands...

Jade: *(sings back)* Best roommate e-ver!

Aliyah sits down and takes out her laptop.

Aliyah: So, I made some talk-to-text notes during the drive, and I know how to fix this show. One condition. When it goes to the publisher, my name comes first.

Jade: We've totally gone through this before. Music always comes before lyrics—

Aliyah: *(singing)* Not this time!

Jade: *(with a sigh)* Okay. Fine.

Aliyah: So, you got the director to postpone it? Cause I think we can get this hammered out in a couple weeks.

Jade: Well, twelve days, anyway. I'm not sure, but I know he liked the Epiphany idea.

Aliyah: Hmm. Well, that'll be tight, but I think we can do it. First, we need to redefine these characters. Each wise man needs to have a separate search in his heart, all of which culminate in finding Jesus.

Jade: Yes.

Aliyah: I think we need an opening number. I'm calling it... *(dramatic flourish)* "A King is Out There Somewhere".

Jade: That's good.

Aliyah: Another thing that's clearly missing, a song where the hero expresses his dream, so we know what he's moving toward. I'm calling it... *(another dramatic flourish)* "I Must Go West."

Jade: Brilliant.

Aliyah: And we need a charm song for the Camel, don't you think?

Jade: Abso-bloomin'-lutely.

Aliyah: Great, let's get to work. You got anything to eat? I'm starved.

Jade: Yeah, I grabbed you something. I know how you run on snacks.

Jade hands her a cup. Just then, Will enters, clapping his hands.

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.

The other actors return to the stage, followed by the Nursery Director.

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him...

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Nursery Director exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Jade: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Aliyah: *(suddenly looking up from her computer)* Okay. So, this year, Epiphany falls on a Monday. Does that mean you're going to run the show the weekend before, or the weekend after?

Aliyah casually takes a handful of the snack in the cup and brings it to her mouth. She is stopped before she can eat it.

Will: What?

Frank: Who are you?

Aliyah: *(singsong)* The answer to your pageant's pa-rayers!

Everyone but Jade looks at each other, confused.

Will: You helped locate the missing gifts?

Aliyah: What? No. I'm Jade's lyricist. You asked us to rewrite the show...didn't you?

Will: What?

Aliyah: You wanted it postponed so we could fix the show's issues. I have a note here saying the original "shows lack of cohesion and demonstrates the writer's incompetence with dialogue and lyrics".

Aliyah breaks off suddenly.

Aliyah: Annnnnnd...I'm talking to the writer, aren't I? *(To Jade)* Girl. *(In singsong)* You could've warned me!

Aliyah puts the handful of snacks into her mouth.

Mariah: *(suspiciously)* What are you eating?

Cameron: Is that...goldfish?

Aliyah: Yeah. Jade grabbed me some earlier. Sorry, are the kids' snacks off limits?

All eyes turn to Jade.

Goldie: JADE!

Will: It was YOU?

Jade opens her mouth but is speechless. Aliyah shuts her laptop and stands up to leave.

Aliyah: So yeah, I'm gonna go now...maybe start a new project. I'm actually thinking the camel deserves a show of its own, maybe a kids' musical. Hmm, maybe "The Rambling Camel?"

Jade: *(finding her voice)* That's pretty good!

Aliyah: Uh-uh. This one isn't gonna have your name on it *(in singsong)* AT ALLLL!

Exit Aliyah.

Will: Jade. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Jade: I...I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Jade: Well honestly, I thought the concept for the show was pretty good. But it wasn't very well executed, and I should have found a way to tell you that before today. But I thought maybe if I could convince you to postpone the show, we could fix it...

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Jade: *(hanging her head)* Yeah, it sounds pretty stupid. I wasn't thinking. I hope you can forgive me...and you can decide if you still want me in the show.

Pause.

Frank: Well, since we're cleansing the camp and all...I could've handled things better too.

Aaron: Me too. Now that I think about it, I came in with an agenda...and that's never good.

Cameron: I never really gave this show a chance. I'm sorry.

Goldie: I suppose I could have taken direction a little better...a lot better, actually.

Mariah: I'm sorry too. At least I'm only carrying the myrrh and not wearing the camel costume.

Cameron looks at Mariah.

Will: You have all finally demonstrated soft and repentant hearts, and therefore I will forgive you. There is still time, albeit very short, for us to turn this show around and have a worshipful opening night.

Pause.

Will: I suppose I should make a confession as well.

The others look at him, surprised.

Will: I have a PhD in pastoral theological studies. I passed each theology course with a 4.0. I also took a handful of writing courses...and I failed all of them.

Each character reacts silently; Mariah starts to giggle and throws her hand over her mouth.

Will: All that to say, perhaps I've not been giving God my best offering, by refusing help from those who are much more gifted in that area. I'm sorry, and I'm going to start seeking your input.

Jade: Well, if we start now, next year's production will be amazing.

Frank: And in the meantime, let's all give tonight our best.

Will: Our best isn't enough.

Goldie: What?

Will: Our best isn't enough. The gifts of our time or our talents—even the best of our talent—isn't enough. The only gift Jesus really wants this Christmas is our heart.

Goldie: Then let's give our whole heart. Everything we got.

Cameron: I'm in.

Mariah: Me too.

Aaron: So am I.

Will: Good. Let's give God the glory, even if we only have three Wise Men. Mariah, can you fill in for Mary? And Frank, you can hold the myrrh.

Frank: Great.

Aaron: Perfect.

Mariah goes to stand next to Aaron.

Aaron reaches one arm to the side and, very visibly but pretending to be discreet, starts to slip it around Mariah.

Mariah: *(shrinking away from Aaron's arm)* I don't think so.

Aaron: Just trying to make it look real.

Will: The musicians should be here any minute. Let's take five and then start from the top. We have time for one final run before the doors open.

All actors exit.

As Aaron and Mariah exit...

Aaron: Maybe we could discuss our characters' motivations over dinner.

Mariah: *(asking an offstage Will)* Can Goldie be Mary? I'll hold the myrrh. Or sing Frank's solo. Or be the camel?

Lights down.

Lights up.

Actors reenter, standing in a line and bow.

Epilogue:

Jade: Now we have a little secret,
Cameron: On which we'll shed some light.
Will: In this, our Christmas pageant,

Frank: Your vote is always right.

Mariah: So if tomorrow you should think

Goldie: The ending needs a change,

Aaron: Please come back and vote again,

Carrie: And we will rearrange.

Aliyah: We hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

Cameron: The only present Jesus wants

Will: is the gift of your heart.

All: Merry Christmas!

ACT IV: Mariah is the Culprit

The stage is empty. Enter Sadie, carrying a large shopping bag.

Sadie: Hello? Anyone here?

Mariah: Sadie! Yay, I love when my baby sister shows up with a shopping bag. Did you find something?

Sadie: Are you kidding? I found lots of things. Bath and Body Bliss was having a huge sale!

Mariah: Oh good. I'll feel so much better if my gift isn't the fragrance of death.

Sadie: Okay, let's see.

She rummages through her bag.

Sadie: So the Magi arrive, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and... *(holding up a red squeeze or spray bottle)* Strawberry Shortcake?

Mariah: I don't know...it seems kind of summery. I'd have to carry a picnic basket.

Sadie: It's always summer in the Middle East, right? But okay.

She pulls out another bottle.

Sadie: Gold, frankincense, and Wintergreen Wonder!

Mariah: Mmmm. Jesus would be minty-fresh.

Sadie: Yes! Very Christmas-y.

Mariah: But it would be kind of like giving Him toothpaste.

Sadie: Yeah, that's more of a stocking stuffer.

Mariah: And not even a good one.

Sadie: Hmm. Well, they had some in the men's section that might work better. Like this one. *(Sadie pulls out another bottle)* Gold, frankincense, and... Maple-Spiced Bacon! What do you think?

Mariah: Perfect! *(Pause)* Wait. Is bacon kosher?

Sadie: Maybe just don't say the bacon part.

Mariah: I can't lie to Jesus!

Just then, Will enters, clapping his hands.

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.

The other actors return to the stage, followed by Pam, the Nursery Director.

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him...

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Pam exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Mariah: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Pam re-enters.

Carrie: One more thing, Pastor... two of the gift boxes are intact, but the third is crumpled and smells like it's been sprayed to death with air freshener. *(Brightly, laughing at her own joke)* This Christmas, the baby Jesus is getting gold, frankincense, and Febreze!

Pam exits. All eyes turn to Mariah.

Goldie: MARIAH!

Will: It was YOU?

Mariah opens her mouth but is speechless. Sadie picks up the shopping bag and starts to exit.

Sadie: I don't know what you did but sounds like you don't need these after all.

Mariah: Umm...except maybe for a peace offering.

Sadie: Cool. Stocking stuffers all around!

She tosses a bottle to Cameron.

Cameron: *(reading the label)* Shampoo that smells like BACON? Score!

Sadie hands out the rest of the items to the other cast members.

Sadie: Mariah, you owe me seventy-eight dollars.

Mariah: What?!

Sadie: *(shrugging)* You wanted options.

Sadie exits.

Will: Mariah. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Mariah: I—I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Mariah: I thought maybe you might let me carry a different gift. *(Speaking quickly)* I don't want to bring Jesus something morbid. I want to be the nice wise man who brings Him...I don't know, something he'd actually want. Like a train set. Or if it had to be perfume, at least something that smelled good.

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Mariah: *(justifying)* Just until Sadie got here with more options. *(Regretfully)* I'm sorry. I should have just come and talked to you. I hope you can forgive me. I'll carry the myrrh if you still want me to.

Pause.

Jade: Well, since we're, you know, "cleansing the camp", I hope you can forgive me, too. I haven't listened to anyone or anything today, except my own ideas.

Frank: Yeah, I could've handled things better too.

Aaron: Me too. Now that I think about it, I came in with an agenda...and that's never good.

Cameron: I never really gave this show a chance. I'm sorry.

Goldie: I suppose I could have taken direction a little better...a lot better, actually.

Will: You have all finally demonstrated soft and repentant hearts, and therefore I will forgive you. There is still time, albeit very short, for us to turn this show around and have a worshipful opening night.

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Each character reacts silently; Mariah starts to giggle and throws her hand over her mouth.

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Jade: This one truth did impart
Cameron: The only present Jesus wants
Will: is the gift of your heart.
All: Merry Christmas!

ACT IV: Aaron is the Culprit

Aaron is alone on center stage, pacing. Sasha enters carrying some candles.

Sasha: It's all set.

Aaron: Perfect. What time is the reservation?

Sasha: I had a better idea.

Aaron: Oh no.

Sasha: I got two Thursday night specials from that new romantic Italian place, Mama Manicotti's. I found some charming music and took the liberty of making you a 'first-date' kind of playlist.

Aaron: Playlist? I thought you were setting up reservations at the new restaurant in town.

Sasha: One romantic dinner for you and the soon to-be-love of your life, but not at the restaurant.

Aaron: Where?

Sasha: I ordered take out and set it up here.

Aaron: In the church?

Sasha: Of course not.

Aaron: Good. Where?

Sasha: Under the big oak tree, on the picnic table.

Aaron: In the church parking lot?

Sasha: It's not technically in the parking lot. It's closer to the youth group volleyball pit.

Aaron: It's freezing outside.

Sasha: It's not snowing.

Aaron: Yet.

Sasha: You worry too much. After Pastor Will cancels the pageant, just ask Mariah if she's hungry and—

Aaron: And what? Ask her if she wants some cold take out in the middle of the parking lot?

Sasha: Ungrateful—

Aaron: Why didn't you just make us a reservation?

The rest of the actors enter.

*Just then, **Will** enters, clapping his hands.*

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.

*The other actors return to the stage, followed by **Pam**, the Nursery Director.*

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him...

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Pam exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Aaron: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Sasha: *(to Aaron)* Isn't that where you told me to put them?

Aaron shoots a glance at Sasha as everyone gasps.

Sasha: I'm guessing you didn't want everyone to know that.

Goldie: AARON!

Will: It was YOU?

Sasha: I'm...gonna go now. I'll just pack up the food.

Cameron: Food? Hey, I'm great at packing up fo—

Sasha: That food cost me fifty bucks. So unless you're paying in cash, you're not helping pack anything.

Sasha exits.

Will: Aaron. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Aaron: I-- I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Aaron: I agreed to bring Josh today thinking I could be Mariah's Joseph. I mean we really clicked on the single's retreat last month.

Mariah: We did?

Aaron: And I thought we could, you know, rekindle the flame being onstage together. And also...well...I've always wanted to be in the Christmas pageant. I thought maybe if I could hide the gifts and then "find them" at the last minute, I'd be the hero of the production.

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Aaron: Well, it was worth a shot. I'm sorry, guys. I hope you can forgive me. And if by chance you decide you need a Joseph...

Pause.

Jade: Well, since we're, you know, "cleansing the camp", I hope you can forgive me, too. I haven't listened to anyone or anything today, except my own ideas.

Frank: Yeah, I could've handled things better too.

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Aaron: Perfect.

Mariah goes to stand next to Aaron.

Aaron reaches one arm to the side and, very visibly but pretending to be discreet, starts to slip it around Mariah.

Mariah: *(shrinking away from Aaron's arm)* I don't think so.

Aaron: Just trying to make it look real.

Will: The musicians should be here any minute. Let's take five and then start from the top. We have time for one final run before the doors open.

All actors exit.

As Aaron and Mariah exit.

Aaron: Maybe we could discuss our characters' motivations over dinner.

Mariah: *(asking an offstage Will)* Can Goldie be Mary? I'll hold the myrrh. Or sing Frank's solo. Or be the camel...

Lights down.

Lights up.

Actors reenter, standing in a line and bow.

Epilogue:

Jade: Now we have a little secret,

Cameron: On which we'll shed some light.

Will: In this, our Christmas pageant,

Frank: Your vote is always right.

Mariah: So if tomorrow you should think

Goldie: The ending needs a change,

Aaron: Please come back and vote again,

Carrie: And we will rearrange.

Sasha: We hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

Cameron: The only present Jesus wants

Will: is the gift of your heart.

ALL: Merry Christmas!

ACT IV: Cameron is the Culprit

Cameron is standing center stage in his camel costume. Jill enters, carrying a folded pair of jeans and a men's shirt.

Jill: Hello? (*Noticing Cameron*) What are you wearing?

Cameron: Did you bring me a change of clothes or not?

Jill: Here.

Cameron: I can't wait to get out of this ridiculous outfit.

Jill: I thought the show was tonight.

Cameron: It was. But now it's probably going to be canceled.

Jill: Canceled? The church Christmas pageant? So many people are going to be disappointed.

Cameron: Well, I won't be one of them.

Jill: Why are they canceling it? (*The next line should only be said if you're performing this as a sequel to Away from A Manger*) Didn't this almost happen last year?

Cameron: I may have pulled a few strings.

Jill: WHAT? Mr. National Honor Society himself?

Cameron: Everyone needs to stop with the National Honor Society thing.

Jill: I don't get it. Wasn't this supposed to be an easy way to get your service hours? They needed an actor to carry the wise men's scene. Done.
(Pause. Jill realizes what has happened) Wait. They didn't mean, an actor to carry the wise men's scene...

Cameron: No.

Jill: *(louder)* They needed an actor to carry the Wise Men.

Cameron: Are you finished?

Jill: This is hilarious.

Cameron: Humiliating.

Jill: Just wait till I tell Uncle Bob...you'll never hear the end of it!

Cameron: Leave my dad out of this. And give me those clothes.

Just then, Will enters, clapping his hands.

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.

The other actors return to the stage, followed by Pam, the Nursery Director.

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him.

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Pam exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Cameron: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Jill re-enters.

Jill: I just have to ask. Where did your other clothes go?

Cameron: What?

Jill: No way did you come to church in that ridiculous outfit. You must have changed here. I mean if you knew they were going to make you be the camel, you wouldn't have shown up at all.

Cameron: Can we talk about this later?

Jill: I'm just really curious where your clothes went.

Cameron: Short answer, something on them was making my allergies act up. *(with significance)* Bye, Jill.

Jill: Allergies? Come on. The only thing you're allergic to is that funky essential oil your mom has...it's like, frankincense, right?

Cameron: JILL...!

Jill: What did you do, spill a bottle on yourself? *(Laughs)* Ha! That's a good one.

Cameron: *(angrily, completely missing the sarcasm)* Well, there wasn't supposed to be actual frankincense in that stupid box!

Silence as everyone (except Jill) realizes what Cameron said. After a moment, Cameron realizes it and does a "facepalm".

Goldie: CAM-er-on!

Will: It was YOU?

Cameron is speechless.

Jill: But don't worry. Remember what they said at your mom's Essential Oil Extravaganza? There are oils you can substitute for frankincense, like sandalwood or...cedarwood...what's that other one that comes from tree sap?

Mariah: *(as if pronouncing a terrible verdict)* Myrrh.

Jill: Yeah, that's the one! Anyway. Is the pageant still on, then, or...?

Will: It's still on.

Jill: Cool. Break a leg, Cam! Or, you know...a hump.

Jill exits, laughing at her own joke.

Will: Cameron. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Cameron: I—I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Cameron: I was just thinking I needed to get out of this ridiculous costume.

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Cameron: I guess I was just being pretty selfish. I wasn't thinking about everyone else. I hope you can forgive me...and you can decide if you still want me in the show.

Pause.

Jade: Well, since we're, you know, "cleansing the camp", I hope you can forgive me, too. I haven't listened to anyone or anything today, except my own ideas.

Frank: Yeah, I could've handled things better too.

Cameron: I never really gave this show a chance. I'm sorry.

Goldie: I suppose I could have taken direction a little better... a lot better, actually.

Mariah: I'm sorry too. At least I'm only carrying the myrrh and not wearing the camel costume.

Cameron looks at Mariah.

Will: You have all finally demonstrated soft and repentant hearts, and therefore I will forgive you. There is still time, albeit very short, for us to turn this show around and have a worshipful opening night.

Pause.

Will: I suppose I should make a confession as well.

The others look at him, surprised.

Will: I have a PhD in pastoral theological studies. I passed each theology course with a 4.0. I also took a handful of writing courses...and I failed all of them.

*Each character reacts silently; **Mariah** starts to giggle and throws her hand over her mouth.*

Will: All that to say, perhaps I've not been giving God my best offering, by refusing help from those who are much more gifted in that area. I'm sorry, all of you, and I'm going to start seeking your input.

Jade: Well, if we start now, next year's production will be amazing.

Frank: And in the meantime, let's all give tonight our best.

Will: Our best isn't enough.

Goldie: What?

Will: Our best isn't enough. The gifts of our time or our talents—even the best of our talent—isn't enough. The only gift Jesus really wants this Christmas is our heart.

Goldie: Then let's give our whole heart. Everything we got.

Cameron: I'm in.

Mariah: Me too.

Aaron: So am I.

Will: Good. Let's give God the glory, even if we only have three Wise Men. Mariah, can you fill in for Mary? And Frank, you can hold the myrrh.

Frank: Great.

Aaron: Perfect.

***Mariah** goes to stand next to **Aaron**.*

***Aaron** reaches one arm to the side and, very visibly but pretending to be discreet, starts to slip it around **Mariah**.*

Mariah: *(shrinking away from **Aaron's** arm)* I don't think so.

Aaron: Just trying to make it look real.

Will: The musicians should be here any minute. Let's take five and then start from the top. We have time for one final run before the doors open.

All actors exit.

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Aaron: Maybe we could discuss our characters' motivations over dinner.

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Lights down.

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Actors reenter, standing in a line and bow.

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Goldie: The ending needs a change,

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Jill: We hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

Cameron: The only present Jesus wants

Will: is the gift of your heart.

All: Merry Christmas!

ACT IV: Goldie is the Culprit

Tilly enters with a sewing kit in one hand, a spool of thread in the other and a sewing needle between her teeth.

Tilly: *(said with needle in mouth)* I'mmm herrrrre.

Goldie: Tilly, be quiet. It took you long enough to get here.

Tilly puts down the sewing kit, center stage, takes the needle out of her mouth and immediately begins to thread it with the thread on the spool.

Tilly: Caitie's dance recital... Adam's award ceremony—I'm basically running a taxi outfit. *(Slight pause)* So how bad is it?

Goldie: Atrocity on top of atrocity. Absolutely blasphemous!

Tilly: I mean we worry about making our joyful noises in key, when are we going to start paying more attention to color schemes?

Goldie: From your lips to God's ears.

Tilly: Where's the fabric? I can re-work these boxes in no time.

Goldie: I thought you were bringing new boxes?

Tilly: There wasn't any time. Where's the fabric?

Goldie: In my office.

Tilly: Where are the boxes?

Goldie: Hidden.

Tilly: Perfect. Tell me where they are, and I'll have them re-covered in no time.

Goldie whispers in her ear.

Goldie: Hurry.

Tilly: Consider it done. *(Turning back to Goldie)* And once this is done, you're going to convince the Pastors that those chairs in the sanctuary need some attention, right?

Goldie: Solving one problem at a time here.

Tilly exits.

Just then, Will enters, clapping his hands.

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.
The other actors return to the stage, followed by Pam, the Nursery Director.

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him...

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Pam exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Goldie: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Tilly enters.

Tilly: Goldie... *(to Goldie)* I thought you said the boxes were in the nursery? With the Goldfish? I can't find them.

Mariah: GOLDIEEE?

Will: It was YOU?

Tilly: Well, who else has the good sense to fix this atrocity of atrocities?

Pause.

Tilly: *(to Goldie)* I let the cat out of the bag, didn't I?

Goldie: You think?

Pause.

Tilly: I'm going to go... but while we're on the subject of BAGS, those sanctuary chairs really do look like—

Goldie: I've got it from here, Tilly.

Tilly exits.

Will: Goldie. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Goldie: I—I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Goldie: I think we need to pay some attention to how we look. I mean I know that God looks at the heart...not the outside. But do our churches really need to be metaphors of this concept? I thought a little bit of class would make this production better.

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Goldie: I'm sorry. *(To Will)* I should have just come and talked to you. I hope you can forgive me. I'll still be a wise man if you want me to be.

Pause.

Jade: Well, since we're, you know, "cleansing the camp", I hope you can forgive me, too. I haven't listened to anyone or anything today, except my own ideas.

Frank: Yeah, I could've handled things better too.

Cameron: I never really gave this show a chance. I'm sorry.

Goldie: I suppose I could have taken direction a little better...a lot better, actually.

Mariah: I'm sorry too. At least I'm only carrying the myrrh and not wearing the camel costume.

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Jade: Well, if we start now, next year's production will be amazing.

Frank: And in the meantime, let's all give tonight our best.

Will: Our best isn't enough.

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Aaron: So am I.

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Carrie: And we will rearrange.

Tilly: We hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

Cameron: The only present Jesus wants

Will: is the gift of your heart.

All: Merry Christmas!

ACT IV: Frank is the Culprit

Frank is standing center stage. Lynnette storms in, clearly outraged.

Lynnette: Where are they?

Frank: Hey, you're early. But thanks for picking me up.

Lynnette: This is ridiculous!

Frank: I know, they promised my car would be out of the shop by now.

Lynnette: I mean the nerve!

Frank: But sharing a car hasn't been that bad.

Lynnette: Where are they?

Frank: *(just realizing how angry she is)* Who? The car repair guys?

Lynnette: Whoever it was that canceled this show! Not on my watch, I tell you! Not on my watch!

Frank: Sweetheart—

Lynnette: *(getting louder)* You deserve this audition. Who else goes to voice lessons every Monday, Wednesday, and alternate Fridays during their lunch break?

Frank: Um, if you could just bring it down a bit—

Lynnette: Who else stays in the shower till they've done arpeggios TWICE around the circle of fifths?

Frank: *(glancing around, worried that someone may hear her)* I get it, Lyn, but—

Lynnette: And finally you get a solo in one of the big productions, and they cancel it at the last minute! Unreal!

Just then, Will enters, clapping his hands.

Will: All right, everyone back in. I think we have a plan for going forward.

The other actors return to the stage, followed by the Pam, the Nursery Director.

Carrie: Excuse me, Pastor. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we have a situation.

Will: A situation? What kind of situation?

Carrie: That child you have in the nursery is crying inconsolably.

Aaron: Aw, Joshy's had a hard day.

Carrie: We were getting him some Goldfish crackers, and when we opened the cabinet, he found three presents he said were for him...

Will: Three presents? We've been looking for them all over the church!

Carrie: *(to Will)* He told me you said the presents were for him. But when they turned out to be empty, he was crushed, poor little guy. You have to be careful what you tell a toddler.

Will: I'm starting to think including a toddler may have been more of a challenge than we anticipated.

Carrie: You're starting to think this?

Pam exits.

Will: At least our gifts have been found.

Frank: What on earth were they doing in the snack cabinet?

Lynnette: Oh, I think I know exactly what they were doing in the snack cabinet.

Frank: You do?

Will: Lynnette! What are you doing here?

Lynnette: *(ignoring Will)* I bet some moron stashed them in there in a pathetic attempt to get this show cancelled.

Frank: *(embarrassed)* Lynnette...

Lynnette: Well, it's not going to work. Do you have any idea how many YEARS my husband has been practicing for a solo in one of these pageants?

Frank: Um, Lyn, I need you to—

Lynnette: Years!!

Frank: *(to the others)* Not really that long.

Lynnette: And he finally—FINALLY—after years and years of disappointment—

Frank: It really hasn't been years.

Lynnette: He lands a solo, an original piece written especially for him, and this is what you do to him? I'd like to throttle whoever thought smuggling those presents would—

Frank: Lynnette, STOP...

Lynnette: And everyone knows the Christmas pageant is really just the audition for the Easter production. This was his big chance. I am ORDERING whoever is responsible for this to step forward.

Will: *(wearily)* Good luck with that.

Lynnette: Whichever one of you was selfish enough to pull such a low, childish stunt like this, ought to be thoroughly ashamed. Who did it? Who is responsible for sabotaging this good man's career?

Frank: Me, all right? It was me.

Goldie: FRANK!

Will: It was YOU?

Lynnette: *(flabbergasted)* WHAT?

Frank: Turned out it wasn't an original piece, it was a short reprise and the lyrics... *(glancing at Will)* left much to be desired. I panicked.

Lynnette: Well, stop panicking and sing it anyways.

The others look at her, clearly surprised at her tone.

Lynnette: You HAVE to get that Easter part. If I have to go one more year of hearing you practice "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth", I'm going to go insane. It's been years of that song!

Frank: It hasn't been years. *(Pause)* Okay, maybe it has.

Lynnette: I could sing it in my sleep.

Jade: Um... "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth"? From "the Messiah"? Sorry, but that's an aria for a Soprano.

Frank and Lynnette: What?

Jade: I don't think you'll be singing it for the Easter production either way.

Frank: We can adapt it for tenor.

Jade: I don't think so. You know how the cantata director wants everything musically accurate.
Pause.

Lynnette: (*glaring at Frank*) Just—just sing the song and be done with it.

Lynnette exits.

Will: Frank. You took the gifts and lied about it. Why would you do something like that?

Frank: I—I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I thought maybe...

Will: Maybe what?

Frank: Maybe I would have some bargaining power to get you to change the song. Or get the show postponed until we could write another one.

Will: And you thought stashing the gifts in the nursery might accomplish that?

Frank: I'm sorry, I should have just come and talked to you about it. I hope you can forgive me, and you can decide if you still want me in the show.

Pause.

Jade: Well, since we're, you know, "cleansing the camp", I hope you can forgive me, too. I haven't listened to anyone or anything today, except my own ideas.

Aaron: Me too. Now that I think about it, I came in with an agenda...and that's never good.

Cameron: I never really gave this show a chance. I'm sorry.

Goldie: I suppose I could have taken direction a little better... a lot better, actually.

Mariah: I'm sorry too. At least I'm only carrying the myrrh and not wearing the camel costume.

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Lights down.

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Cameron: On which we'll shed some light.

Will: In this, our Christmas pageant,

Frank: Your vote is always right.

Mariah: So if tomorrow you should think

Goldie: The ending needs a change,

Aaron: Please come back and vote again,

Carrie: And we will rearrange.

Lynnette: We hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

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Will: is the gift of your heart.

All: Merry Christmas!

Epilogue for the Last Performance:

Jade: Now we have a little secret,

Cameron: On which we'll shed some light.

Will: In this, our Christmas pageant,

Frank: Your vote is always right.

Mariah: So if perhaps you're thinking

Goldie: That this ending wasn't strong,

Aaron: Please don't blame the actors

Carrie: Your neighbor must've voted wrong.

Lynnette: But we hope our time together

Jade: This one truth did impart

Cameron: The only present Jesus wants

Will: Is the gift of your heart.

All: Merry Christmas!

Lights out.