

Act One

Scene One--The Hotspot

The scene opens with The Announcer (T.A.), inviting the audience to the latest performance at the Herbst Hotspot. The curtain is closed, but glitzy lights are flashing. Fingers McGee is at the piano, tinkling furiously.

T.A.: And now, what you've all been waiting for, live from the Herbst Hotspot--located in the secret cellar of the Herbst post office in scenic Herbst, Indiana (just two miles east of that sweet town of Swayzee), it's Judy Jingle and Her Belles!

The curtain opens on Judy and her back-ups, dressed in red flapper dresses with white fur add-ons/accessories. Fingers McGee plays a very speakeasy-inspired version of "Jingle Bells," while Judy and her backups sing and dance. During the number, it should become obvious that Judy is trying to locate someone in the audience. After the song is over, the girls wave and blow kisses to the audience as long as comically beneficial while Fingers McGee makes a growing effort to play them off. Judy's attitude becomes more desperate and eventually makes it clear that the person she has been looking for is clearly not here. As she stomps off petulantly, the curtain closes.

T.A.: Place your drink orders while we take a break. And tip your waitresses--because the only thing we tip is Farmer Pence's cows! *[Fingers also has a snare drum, on which he hits a rim shot.]* Or place your bets with Lucky Louie in the back room. If anyone asks, he's the only rat we've ever seen back there! *[Rim shot]*

T.A.: *[Crosses to Fingers. Fingers is playing an underscored version of "Jingle Bells" still while the following conversation goes on.]* Did Judy seem 'off' to you, or was that just me?

FINGERS: Maybe a little at the end--but she was still 70 times better than anyone else in this dive and **don't. you. forget it.**

T.A.: All right all right...but don't **you** forget you're a guy whose paid by Judy's boyfriend, who happens to be the proprietor of this club **and** the most unique entrepreneur this side of Kokomo: Bootsy Branson.

FINGERS: *[With a false sense of bravado]* I'm not afraid of a guy whose first name describes baby shoes. And as for my pay, I'd be bringin' home more peanuts cleaning up after the elephants at the Matter Park zoo.

T.A.: I'd still be very careful, if I was you. I'm the closest thing you've got to a friend around here, and I don't wanna hafta identify the body when they find you floatin' in the Mississinewa. There ain't no broad worth finding yourself in a Chicago coffin for. The bims that work joints like this are a dime a dozen.

FINGERS: *[Stops playing abruptly/slams keys or shuts the piano lid; grabs T.A. by the shirt front]* Don't let me ever catch you casting aspersions on Judy again! Just 'cause she's datin' Bootsy...**we're** working for him, aren't we? That makes us worse than her any day of the week! And as for the other girls, cut them some slack, too. They're all someone's sister or daughter or cousin, you know?

T.A.: I guess I never thought about it that way. I gotta younger sister myself. She married the first local yokel who paid her any mind, and now she's got five kids under the age of six while he hangs out in joints not nearly as classy as this one every night. It's no life, I tell you. *[Beat]* You better start playing again. People are starting to stare like we're the next act.

FINGERS: What is the next act?

TA: _____ *[This will be someone from the audience for each performance, who will do some completely awful beginning of a completely awful act. During the previous conversation, the person will be fitted with various props and/or costumes.]*

Scene Two--Judy's dressing room

Judy is sitting at her dressing table, crying. Her tears subsiding, she begins sniffing and powdering her nose. Just as she seems to have her emotions and her nose under control, she blows her nose with a trumpet-like flair, which destroys her careful powdering. She begins to cry again.

BOOTSY: *[Knocking offstage]* Judy? Where's my funny little flapper? *[Pause]* Where's my crazy little canary? *[Pause]* I can hear you in there boo-hooing, Judy. Are you gonna open the door, or am I gonna have to kick the door down and take the repair money out of your pay?

JUDY: It's your place of business. Do whatever you want to do. I'm just the hired help. However, you might check to see if the door is locked or not before you go damaging the property of which you are the owner.

BOOTSY: *[Comes in sheepishly]* How many times have I told you to keep your dressing room door locked? It's a crazy world out there, and there are plenty of palookas

just waiting for the chance to hurt me by hurting my girl. *[Goes to kiss Judy on the cheek, but she shrugs away from him.]*

JUDY: Puh-leese. Do not attempt to titillate me with tawdry stories of your criminal entanglements.

BOOTSYSY: Criminal entanglements? Baby, I'm a businessman on the up and up. I left my titillatin' and my tawdry ways behind when I bought this place for you to perform. I'm legit now.

JUDY: First of all, if that's the case, why are plenty of palookas trying to hurt you? And second of all, how do you buy the basement of a post office?

BOOTSYSY: Baby, you know I haven't always been the fine, upstandin' businessman I am today. I still have some enemies from the old days. That's to be expected. But your love has made me a new kind of bird these days. You won't find me behind the 8 ball any more. I'm a changed man! And as for how I bought this space...I haven't been a changed man for very long.

JUDY: I don't even know what I see in you.

BOOTSYSY: The future, Baby!

JUDY: I'm not sure I want a future with a man who has an unsavory past.

BOOTSYSY: Come on, now! You're my main squeeze! I'm doing all of this for you!

JUDY: Well, if that's the case, then why did you miss my performance tonight? I know you weren't here. I looked all over the audience and backstage.

BOOTSYSY: I had a little business to take care of. I had to see a man about a horse.

JUDY: You were betting when you should have been watching?

BOOTSYSY: *[Realizes he's busted]* Ah, no, Judy! Not that kind of horse! I was seeing a man about buying you a pony for when we get married so we could have a little farm for just the two of us. Wouldn't that be the bee's knees? I could be Mr. Bootsy Branson, gentleman farmer, and you could be Milkmaid Judy. Wouldn't that be a riot? And we could have ourselves a plot of land with all sorts of animals: goats and ducks and rabbits and dogs and cats and pigs and alligators and--

JUDY: Alligators? What are we going to do with alligators?

BOOTSY: We could have a moat, and they could swim in it and keep us safe from unsavory characters from my past--or at least keep your mother from visiting.

JUDY: Bootsy, you've gotta try harder with my mother! She's never gonna let you marry me if she doesn't like you--so if you want to be Gentleman Farmer Bootsy, you better do better than you've done so far, because she does not like you...especially when you miss one of my performances! The only reason she lets me perform here now is because Fingers can walk me home each night since he is renting one of our extra rooms.

BOOTSY: Fingers? The piano player? What kind of protection does she think that rube can provide? Is he supposed to serenade someone to death? He can't throw a punch without running the risk of breaking his money-makers. *[Wiggles his fingers to clarify his meaning]*

JUDY: Maybe so, but he's polite.

BOOTSY: Polite ain't worth much when someone's squirting metal at your brain! Come on, now, Judy, you know I'm the best you're ever gonna have. A sheba like you deserves a sheik like me. Am I right, or am I right? *[Opens his arms to embrace Judy, and she walks into his embrace.]* There you go; just where you belong.

BELLA: *[Enters from the hall]* Actually, where Judy belongs **RIGHT NOW** is in the wings 'cause it's about time for our last number of the night.

JUDY: *[Slips behind dressing screen]* Bootsy, you better watch **THIS** number! I mean it!

BOOTSY: Of course, Baby! I wouldn't miss it for the world! There's nothing I look forward to more than a performance by Jingle and the Tingles. *[Looks leeringly at Bella]*

JUDY: That's not our name! *[Comes out from behind the screen; slaps Bootsy on the arm.]* You don't even know our name is Judy Jingle and Her Belles!

BOOTSY: *[He echoes her slightly after each word.]* Judy Jingle and Her Belles--Of course I do! I'm just pulling your leg. Who signs the paychecks around here, Baby?

JUDY: Oh, you! Now I know you're just playing around. We get paid in cash! *[Goes back behind the dressing screen.]* I can't wait for you to see our next number; you'll love it!

BOOTSY: *[Slaps Bella on the behind as he walks out; based on her reaction, it's not the first time, nor will it be the last.]* I'm sure I will.

Scene Three--The Hotspot

TA: You loved 'em before, and you'll love 'em again! It's Judy Jingle and Her Belles!

Fingers begins playing a speakeasy-inspired version of "Deck the Halls" as the curtains open and reveal Judy, dressed as a Christmas tree. She sings the first verse by herself and is then joined by the Belles, who are still in their flapper dresses but have removed their fur accessories and have replaced them with tinsel. As they all sing together, the Belles "decorate" Judy. At least two or three times, there should be a suggestion that Bella has pinched or somehow surreptitiously hurt Judy. Judy is enough of a pro to make it only a little noticeable. At the conclusion of the song, all the girls wave and blow kisses and then leave. Judy does not notice that Bella is blowing kisses to Bootsy, but Fingers does.

TA: All right, you know what to do now. Last call for giggle juice tonight! We're running a respectable establishment here, and we don't serve the hooch to any cat or pooch past midnight. *[To Fingers]* You look like you're about to go off the track. What's up?

FINGERS: *[Still playing a variation of "Deck the Halls" as underscoring]* You can't tell me that you didn't see Bella making eyes at Bootsy.

TA: I find it much easier to stay alive if I can't see much of what's going on around here. Besides, what's it matter to you? I've never seen you say more than two words to Bella. Since when are you keen on her?

FINGERS: Don't be a maroon! I don't care about Bella at all. I just don't want to see Judy have her heart broken, that's all.

TA: Like I told you before, paying too much attention to Judy is not gonna pay off for you in the end. There's no reason for you to get yourself zotzed just because Bootsy's got a wandering eye. It's best to keep your beezee out of Bootsy's beeswax. You're here to tickle the ivories--nothing else, nothing more.

FINGERS: To tell you the truth--

BOOTSY: *[Walks up with Judy]* Hey, there, T.A., how was the gate tonight?

TA: Not too bad, Boss. I think we're doing a pretty good job of getting the word out that we're here without the coppers gettin' wind of our operation.

BOOTSY: Well, let's keep it that way. I don't need any elephant ears busting our little clip joint until I get a little more kale. Capeesh?

TA: Don't you worry, Boss. This drum has been good to me. I'm returning the favor.

BOOTSY: *[To Fingers, as he finishes playing the song]* Speaking of returning favors, I hear you're the egg that's been escorting Judy back to her house each night when I'm otherwise detained. What's in it for you?

FINGERS: I'm not sure what you mean.

BOOTSY: Like, you expecting a bonus in your pay or what?

FINGERS: I'm just being polite, Mr. Branson. Since I'm renting a room from Judy's mother at her boarding house, it just seems logical to walk back with Judy late at night.

BOOTSY: Yeah, I guess a daisy like you could use an escort, but Judy's not all that tough. It's one of her downfalls. But, hey, if she makes you feel safer, more power to you.

FINGERS: I'm not counting on her to protect--

BOOTSY: Speaking of my little tomato, here she is.

JUDY: *[Enters wearing wearing street clothes with a coat over her arm]* Bootsy, you know I don't like it when you call me a food item.

BOOTSY: Okay, my dame, my chick, my Jane. How's that?

JUDY: *[Simultaneously]* You could just call me Judy.

FINGERS: *[Simultaneously]* You could just call her Judy.

BOOTSY: Hey, somebody bring these two copycats a couple of sodas!

JUDY: *[To Bootsy]* Aren't we gonna spend some time together?

BOOTSY: I have some business to attend to--but the piano guy is going to walk you home, Right, Piano Guy?

FINGERS: *[Simultaneously]* It's Fingers.

JUDY: *[Simultaneously]* It's Fingers.

BOOTSY: Well, I didn't think it would be Toes.

JUDY: What kind of business are you conducting after midnight?

BOOTSY: The kind that makes it easier for Fingers here to escort you back to your ma's house. Nothing too excitin'. I'll see you tomorrow, Honey! *[He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek.]* You're the cat's pajamas! And the soda's on me!

A waitress brings out two Cokes. Fingers and Judy shrug at each other as if to say, "Why not?" and sit down. Their silence is awkward as they each take a sip. Judy looks toward where Bootsy exited and sighs.

FINGERS: I know I haven't been working here long, but I can't help but notice that Bootsy has a lot of meetings late at night. I've only been here a month, and I think this is the 20th time I've walked you home.

JUDY: Actually, you've walked me home 18 times. The first two times, I was walkin' you--and, yeah, Bootsy's a real 24-hour-a-day entre-manure.

FINGERS: So, are you two serious about each other?

JUDY: It's hard to say. He says he wants to marry me, but words are cheap.

FINGERS: Do you want to marry him?

JUDY: Well, I mean, I want to get married someday, and he's the only guy who has ever talked about marrying me, so...

FINGERS: I bet there would be a lot of interested men if you gave them a chance. Nice men...like the kind you might meet at a church social, or a soda fountain, or a music studio, or a gumshoe's office.

JUDY: We have churches and a soda fountain in Herbst, but the closest music studio is in Marion, and I have no idea where a gumshoe's office might be.

FINGERS: There's one in Ft. Wayne--at least I would suppose there would be. I'm just guessing.

JUDY: I've never been there, but I suppose you're right. *[Companionable silence]* I guess we better be on our way. My mother worries when we come back so late at night--although she certainly appreciates that you walk with me.

FINGERS: I'm honored to be your escort. Besides, any man worth his salt would make sure a girl is safely home at night. *[Sees that Judy looks crestfallen]* I mean, well, you know--

JUDY: Unfortunately, I know, too. *[Beat]* Let's go.

FINGERS: *[Helps Judy with her coat; offers his arm]* Away we go.

Scene Four--Ma Jingle's Boarding House

JUDY: *[Entering and being helped out of her coat by Fingers]* Ma, we're here. I'm home.

MA: *[Entering]* Hello, Judy... Mr. Fingers... Do you need a bite to eat? I have some cookies I just made a little while ago.

JUDY: Ma, why would you be making cookies this late at night?

MA: Now, Judy, you know I don't sleep well until you get home. So I made some cookies. It's the holidays. It's natural to want to bake.

JUDY: Ma, it's just us. We have only one boarder left, and now that Pa is gone--

MA: Let's have some cookies and milk. Mr. Fingers, would you enjoy some cookies and milk?

FINGERS: Mrs. Jingle, I would be delighted to share a midnight snack with you...but I don't want to eat more than I pay for. You don't charge me much at all for my room and board here. I would be glad to pay extra for a snack.

MA: How about you and Judy sing a little song, and I'll consider that payment enough. I never get to hear Judy perform.

JUDY: Ma, you could come to the club any time.

MA: I don't want to see that four flusher Bootsy.

JUDY: Ma, he's not a four flusher! *[Beat]* And, honestly, he's not there all that often, so you probably wouldn't run into him.

MA: Nonetheless, I prefer to hear a song from my beautiful daughter right here in my parlor. And I would love to hear you accompany her, Mr. Fingers.

FINGERS: I would be glad to, Mrs. Jingle...but only if you call me by my real name: Daniel.

MA: Like in the lion's den?

FINGERS: More than you know.

Fingers and Judy sing "Silent Night" while Fingers plays and Ma hums along. Ma's eyes tear up.

MA: *[After they finish]* That was so beautiful. Thank you. Your father loved that song, Judy. Do you remember him singing it last Christmas?

JUDY: How could I forget? His voice was like an angel's. I miss him so.

FINGERS: When did he pass away?

JUDY: We don't know that he did. He's just...not here.

MA: He went on the train to Ft. Wayne for business...but he never came back. We know he got off the train there, but he never came home. We contacted the police, but they said he was probably a fakeloo or on a toot. They don't know what a good man he is...was...is. My dear, sweet Jimmy...

FINGERS: How long has he been gone?

MA: It's been almost seven months now. He was the postmaster here. We haven't had a proper post office since.

JUDY: After he didn't come back, Ma started renting rooms, and then when Bootsy opened the Hotspot, I started working there to help Ma.

FINGERS: Have you considered hiring a detective?

MA: Of course--but that's expensive.

FINGERS: What if I could get you one for free?

JUDY: How could you do that?

FINGERS: Can I trust you ladies with a secret?

MA: Will it put us in danger, Daniel?

FINGERS: I would never do that to such fine ladies.

MA: Well, then, go ahead. Confession is good for the soul.

FINGERS: I'm not exactly who you think I am. I told you my real first name is Daniel. My real last name is Malone. Fingers McGee is my undercover name. I'm a snooper from Ft. Wayne.

JUDY: Oh, my goodness!

FINGERS: I'm here looking for my cousin Helen. She ran away from home after my aunt died, and my uncle is frantic about her. My cousin and my uncle had a lot of arguments about her wanting to quit school to become a jazz baby, so she went on the lam. I've been going from speakeasy to speakeasy, state road 7 to 35 to 37, posing as a piano player, to see if I can find any trace of her. She's a good girl, so I'm trying to find her before she gets mixed up with some two-bit hustler like Boot--well, like some hustlers I've met along the way.

JUDY: I know what you started to say--and I should be angry--[*resigned*] but I'm not.

MA: Daniel, what does your cousin look like?

FINGERS: Here's a photograph. It's not all that recent, but it's still a good likeness.

MA: Saints be praised! Daniel, you're on the right track! Look at this picture, Judy. This girl is the very girl who was renting the room Daniel is staying in right now. She moved out two days before you arrived, Daniel. She told us her name was Helene, and she was performing at the Hotspot as a piano player. You took her place! Could your cousin play the piano?

FINGERS: Like a dream! My aunt--her mother--taught us both. Did she say where she was going when she left?

JUDY: She came close to telling me at the Hotspot the night before she left. She said she realized she was not made for the life of a jazz baby but that she couldn't go home until she made some honest money to buy her train ticket back. Then she said she had found a respectable position in Marion in a job she had experience doing.

MA: What kind of job would that be, I wonder?

FINGERS: Well, she worked at a jewelry store on Superior Street in Ft. Wayne. Is there a jewelry store in Marion?

JUDY: There sure is! Anderson's. I've pointed to many different items in that window while walking with Bootsy. So far, he hasn't taken the hint.

FINGERS: Sounds like I have a lead for tomorrow...or later today, actually. Thank you, ladies! This is the closest I have felt to finding Helen since I started looking for her! Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could get her back home before Christmas?

MA: *[Choked up with her own loss]* It would be wonderful, Mr. Fingers.

FINGERS: Mrs. Jingle, don't think I've forgotten your loss. I'm going to do my best to find out what happened to your husband.

MA: Bless you, my boy...and I would be honored if you would call me Mildred.

FINGERS: I am honored to do so.

Scene Five--Gary the Goat's "Office"

The office looks like it could be in an alley or an abandoned corner of a warehouse. Gary is sitting at his desk, which is probably no more than stacked crates serving multiple purposes. It would be best if Gary could look a bit like a billy goat--perhaps because of a wispy goatee. Various other gangsters inhabit the space in the shadows, such as Paulie the Pigeon, Randy the Rat, Anchovy Arlo, and Big Bob. Bootsy enters with a shove from Gary's right-hand man, Lefty Larry.

BOOTSY: Hey, watch the threads! I bought this at Gimbels!

GARY: You're late. What's the hold up?

BOOTSY: I was having business discussions at the Hotspot.

GARY: Yeah, well, you're keeping us from discussing business here. How do you think that made all of us feel?

BOOTSY: Uhm...

GARY: Don't bother answerin'. *[To all the men]* Attention, gentlemen. *[They react with laughter, arm punching, etc.]* This here's an important meeting. As you all know, the holidays are coming, and what better way to celebrate the season of

giving money? than by giving Summitville Slim and his compatriots a run for their

LEFTY: I wholeheartedly approve.

PAULIE: As do I.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

GARY: As some of you might have heard, Bootsy here has been diversifying his business connections and has created a little source of income flow from the basement of the Herbst post office.

LEFTY: I am wholeheartedly impressed.

PAULIE: As am I.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

BOOTSY: What you haven't heard, though, is that my hideaway in Herbst is just a way to keep the johns with their bean shooters occupied on Christmas Eve. Unbeknownst to all, I have access to a little flat right on the square in Marion. It's an upper apartment with thin floors right above Anderson's Jewelry Store, and I also have access to storage in the cellar--a cellar that shares a wall with the vault of the Marion National Bank.

LEFTY: My wholehearted best wishes are yours.

PAULIE: As are mine.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

GARY: I don't think these boys have crabbled what grift you've cooked up.

LEFTY: Oh, I wholeheartedly understand. You're ready to take the leap with Judy...

PAULIE: As you should be for such a sweet little gal...

RANDY: I concur she is sweet...

ARLO: And absolutely it is time for Bootsy to settle down...

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

BOOTSY: What a bunch of dolts!

GARY: Disappointing, to be sure.

LEFTY: I am wholeheartedly confused.

PAULIE: As am I.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely flummoxed.

BOB: Let me give this a shot. Bootsy rented the flat with thin floors so that he can cut a little boobie hatch down into Anderson's Jewelers after they close on Christmas Eve. While he's glaumming baubles, some of our best hoods will be blowing a hole into the vault via the storage cellar and helping themselves to enough lettuce to make 20 years of salads. Meanwhile, the coppers--acting on a tip from a snitch who dropped a dime to tell them about the assorted illegal activities going on in Herbst--will be putting the pinch on all the sheiks and shebas at Bootsy's gin joint. While those palookas and pales are grabbing air and getting grilled, we'll all be lousy with cash and ice. By New Year's Eve, we'll be with some lookers on a tropical island, and the buttons will still be scratching their heads and wondering what happened.

BOOTSY: *[Slow clap]* Congratulations for having a brain.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

GARY: I still have some questions, Bootsy.

BOOTSY: Fire away.

GARY: The flatties are gonna know you're the one who rented the apartment, aren't they?

BOOTSY: Covered. I made the arrangements over the phone and said I was Fingers McGee's uncle. I told the landlord that *[switches to an Irish brogue]* 'the wee laddie needs a new place to stay because Judy's ma is uncomfortable with him staying at her rooming house with all those impressionable females.'

GARY: This plan is as close to fool-proof as any I've seen for a while. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I am almost late for a date with the gracious Gladys, and she does not like for me to make her wait. *[He exits.]*

LEFTY: I am wholeheartedly impressed...but what about your employees at the speakeasy? What's gonna happen to them?

BOOTSY: They'll get hauled in via paddy wagon to the clubhouse and eventually will be released once it's obvious they haven't been profiting in any way large from the clip joint. Consider them chumps. I mean, sure, they'll be on the nut for a while, but who amongst us has not been?

ARLO: Absolutely true. Ultimately, you're just helping all those babes and birds seek legal, responsible employment. Bootsy, from my way of thinking, you are providing a valuable community service.

GARY: *[From offstage]* Lefty, Gladys has a cousin in town. You are hereby summoned to be her date. Let's go. *[Lefty leaves while grumbling.]*

RANDY: What about Judy? Surely you are not going to leave a dish such as her behind! She has been a true blue dame to you for so long now. What if the coppers think she's the high pillow and try to pin everything on her?

BOOTSY: It will be unfortunate but necessary for Judy to be unaware of this plan. Her reaction when the bulls bust through the door has to be legitimate. I don't know if you've noticed or not, but Judy's not too talented in the realm of theatrical playacting. Besides, it might take quite a few weeks before the heat is off for me to come back here and pick Judy up. While I'm gone, it's best if Judy is sore with me so that she won't try looking for me. As for her being pinned as the big cheese, there's no chance of that. My last act as the boss of the Herbst Hotspot is to leave plenty of incriminating paperwork around with Gary the Goat's name in all the right blanks. He's been taking more than his fair dibs for quite some time and playing me for a patsy, not realizing that I saw right through his games.

While we take a powder, he's gonna have to take the fall. *[Beat]* Paulie, Randy, Arlo, Bob, I am trusting you with my life and livelihood in this caper. You in?

PAULIE: I am.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

BOOTSY: I'm glad to hear that because I didn't want any of you to be suffering from lead poisoning if you get my drift.

ARLO: Absolutely, Bootsy. I have a question, though. How are we gonna explain all the comings and goings on Christmas Eve into an apartment and a basement where no one hangs out otherwise? Some people like to stay home and spend time with their families on Christmas Eve, don't they? Five guys don't look much like a family unit.

BOB: Allow me to offer a suggestion. You are right in suggesting that five spiffy daddies making lots of moves on Christmas Eve would be suspicious. But you know who wouldn't be suspicious on Christmas Eve? Five Kris Kringles.

BOOTSY: That's a pretty good idea, but where are we gonna get five Santa suits by Christmas Eve?

RANDY: Actually, I can handle this part. My cousin is part of Summitville Slim's gang, and they had several Santas out collecting change from unsuspecting citizens of Summitville. The people thought they were donating to charity, but instead they were feathering Slim's nest. They quit collecting money about a week ago because some people started asking questions, so their Santa suits are available. Of course, there might be a slight rental fee--

BOOTSY: Or perhaps we could use the suits for free in the spirit of the season, especially if we agree not to tip off the authorities where Slim and his mob meet on the regular.

RANDY: You make a good point. I'll pick up the suits tomorrow.

BOOTSY: Bob, I like the way your mind works. How would you like to be in charge of the activities connected to the vault? I'll be handling the jewelry heist part.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

BOOTSY: All right. Let's scram for now. Play it safe and play it quiet. I already got plenty of canaries willing to sing for me; I don't need any of you to sing. You understand? *[They each nod.]* Now, get out of here. *[All leave but Bootsy. Gary and Lefty enter after a few moments.]*

GARY: Very impressive. They seemed to buy it hook, line, and sinker. As if you would double cross me and Lefty. Ha! That would be your worst plan ever.

LEFTY: I wholeheartedly agree.

BOOTSY: By the time those saps show up on Christmas Eve, we will have already cleaned out the safe and the jewelry store, and the cops will be right there to pick up several stupid Santas. Meanwhile, you two, Judy, and I will be sitting pretty at the Herbst Hotspot, where the cops will NOT be because I made up that part of the plan, too. Then, once we get word that the jingle-brained Santas have been apprehended, we can hop the next train to Chicago and expand our horizons.

GARY: This is quite a sting you have concocted. How would you like to be my third in command in Chicago once we get settled?

BOOTSY: I would be honored. My handshake is as good as my word. *[Shakes hands with Gary.]* Now, you two better vamoose before anyone sees me leaving here with you.

LEFTY: I wholeheartedly agree.

Gary and Lefty leave. Bootsy wanders around Gary's office for a bit and then looks to make sure Gary and Lefty are not still lingering outside the door. Picks up phone. Calls.

BOOTSY: It's all taken care of. Sure I'm sure. Baby, you know I love you, and I couldn't possibly leave you behind when I amscray for Scranton, PA. ... Nothin' is gonna go wrong. I've planned everything. On the 23rd, I will begin my tunnel into the bank vault. I'll leave the break-through for the night of the 24th. I'll patch up my hole good as new so that nothin' will be noticed during business hours. You're gonna make a phone call on the 23rd to call "as a concerned citizen" who's heard about a bank job being pulled off by some unsavory Santas on the 24th. The boys will get picked up before they even begin their box job. They're gonna try to rat me out, for sure, but I won't be anywhere around the bank, the jewelry store, or the apartment. We'll be in Herbst for the early show, just like usual, but then we'll clear out right before the bulls show up. While the heat is on in Herbst, we'll be shimmying through the ceiling of the jewelry store. We'll make the grab--yes,

you can pick out something pretty just for you--and then take a few stacks from the bank vault and clear out, headed for a happy New Year's Eve in Scranton. ... Yeah, I can't wait to meet your ma. ... The most important job for you is to play it cool. You can't let anyone at the club hear any details. I'm countin' on you, Baby. ... This is going to be the beginning of our lives together. I'm ready to play it clean from here on out. I just have to pull one more caper before we get a wiggle on to our new, respectable lives. ... What? That dumb Dora? She doesn't suspect a thing. You don't have to worry about Judy; her brains are jingled. ... Bye, Bella! You're my one true doll baby!

Curtain

Act Two

Scene Six--Ma Jingle's Boarding House

FINGERS: *[On the telephone]* Listen, Harvey, if I had the time to come to town and try to trace Mr. Jingle myself, I would. I'm working a case about 60 miles away, though, so I need you to help me out. ... What do you mean, what's in it for you? The same rate as always: 20 cents an hour--and don't go padding your timecard. I

always treat you fairly; I expect you to do the same for me. ... *[Judy enters unnoticed.]* These are nice women, and they speak glowingly of him. I can't believe he vamoosed. His wife and his daughter both say he was on the level. ... Yeah, I know; the wife is always the last to know--but he was a postmaster, for Pete's sake! How much of a secret life could he have? ... I promised to try to find out what happened, and that's what I'm gonna do. ... Between you and me, I have a feeling the Jingle trail is gonna lead to a Chicago overcoat, but knowing is better than not knowing, right? ... I'll check in tomorrow. Bye.

JUDY: I heard what you said. You think my father is dead?

FINGERS: I don't know what to think, Judy. You and your mother make him out to be the berries, but I don't really know him. I only know what you two have told me. And based on what you have told me, he doesn't sound like the kind of guy who would run a con. He sounds more like a guy who might end up the chump in someone else's con, though, and that could be deadly

JUDY: I can't decide which is worse: finding out he took a dangle or finding out he's dead.

FINGERS: No matter what, Judy, I'm gonna do my best to find out what happened to him. I have one of my associates in Ft. Wayne checking with doctors, police, and the mor--and with more places. Next to finding my cousin, finding your father is the most important job I can think of right now.

JUDY: You're such a good guy. You remind me of my father.

FINGERS: *[Looking crestfallen]* Gee, thanks. Just what a guy wants to hear from a pretty girl.

JUDY: Oh, gosh! I didn't mean it *that* way! I don't think of you as a father figure! I just mean he's a good guy with a swell singing voice like you. And he can play the piano, too! *[Beat]* You think I'm pretty?

From this point in the scene on, Fingers and Judy should find themselves leaning toward each other frequently but then pulling apart right before they might kiss.

FINGERS: *[Shy]* Yes, Judy, I sure do. *[Bolder]* And it's not for me to say, but I think you could do much better for yourself than Bootsie.

JUDY: Thank you, Fing--Daniel. You make me think I deserve better, too.

FINGERS: *[Starts improvising a little of "Toyland."]* I bet you could make it in the big time as long as you had someone helping you dream big instead of someone who wants you to stay small.

JUDY: What's that song? Your cousin played it a couple times when she was here, but I never heard her sing more than a few words.

FINGERS: It was a favorite of my aunt and uncle's. We both heard it a lot growing up. *[He begins to sing and play "Toyland." Judy joins in the second time around.]* You like it? We could work it in at the Hotspot.

JUDY: That audience doesn't seem like one that would appreciate a song like this one.

FINGERS: Maybe they just need to broaden their horizons--like you do, maybe.

JUDY: Let's see what we can do with it! The Jingles could all be dressed as baby dolls, I could be a toy of some kind, too, and you and T.A. could be dressed as toy soldiers. What do you think?

FINGERS: I like it! What kind of toy do you want to be?

JUDY: I didn't have a lot of toys growing up. Could you suggest one for me?

FINGERS: How about a beautiful ballerina that comes out of a music box?

JUDY: Oh, I don't know. ... Do you think I could?

FINGERS: I'm sure of it.

BOOTSY: *[Entering just as it looks like Judy and Fingers might kiss]* Hey, Doll!

JUDY: Bootsy, you know my mother doesn't like you to come here when she's not here to chaperone.

BOOTSY: What's she gonna do when we get hitched? Chaperone the honeymoon? Besides, piano boy is here. Where's your chaperone for him?

JUDY: She doesn't think I need one when he's here.

BOOTSY: Congratulations, piano boy! You're considered no threat to broads!

Bootsy laughs obnoxiously while squeezing Judy tightly. She looks uncomfortable. Fingers looks like he's having a hard time keeping calm.

MA: *[Entering from a grocery shopping trip]* Judy, what is Mr. Branson doing here when I'm not present?

BOOTSY: Awww, **Ma**, surely you've gotten used to my being around by now.

MA: First of all, it's Mrs. Jingle to you, Mr. Branson. Second, I run a clean boarding house, and having you here doesn't help that at all.

BOOTSY: Judy, when is your mother gonna give me a break?

MA: Arm, leg, or neck, Mr. Branson?

BOOTSY: *[Laughs with a hollow and threatening ring]* Oh, Judy, it's such a shame that your mother won't be living with us when we get married. Such a funny old broad. I'll hate to see her go.

FINGERS: Speaking of going, I'm going into Marion. Mildred, do you need anything from town?

MA: Bless your heart, Daniel--**you're** such a sweet boy--but no thank you.

FINGERS: Well, then, I'll take my leave. Judy, we can work on that new song later tonight. Mr. Branson...have a good afternoon. Good-bye, Mildred.

BOOTSY: *[As Fingers leaves]* Daniel? Mildred? My, you're all on a first-name basis here, aren't you?

JUDY: *[Changing subject]* Bootsy, why are you here?

BOOTSY: I wanted to tell you in person that I need you to work on Christmas Eve. It's gonna be an important night at the Hotspot, and I definitely want you to be there.

MA: Mr. Branson, is that necessary? What kind of people would come to a...nightclub on Christmas Eve?

BOOTSY: If you wanna know so bad, why don't you drop in, Mrs. Jingle? It's not like anybody is gonna be here with you. Since your husband took a powder, there's no reason you shouldn't come out and have some fun. I'll even spot you a sawbuck as a little Christmas present. What do you say?

MA: What I say is, Judy, please ask **your boss** to leave. We have things to do.

JUDY: We do? Oh, yeah, we do. Bootsy, I'll see you tonight, right?

BOOTSY: That's always my goal. *[Blows a kiss]* There's a good bye for both of you! Don't take any wooden nickels, Mrs. J. Judy, don't be late tonight. It looks bad for the owner not to be able to control his employees. *[Pinches Judy's cheek just a little too hard. Exits]*

MA: Judy--

JUDY: *[Resigned]* I know, Ma. I know.

Scene Seven--Anderson's Jewelry Store

MARY: (As Fingers enters) Good morning, Sir. Welcome to Anderson's. What can I show you today? Perhaps something for a special young lady?

FINGERS: I am here for a special young lady, but I'm not shopping, I'm afraid. My name is--

MARY: Oh, I recognize you, Sir. You're Fingers McGee, the piano player from the Hotspot. I was there a few nights ago to see a friend perform--but don't tell my father! You're quite good. When I found out you were renting the room above the store, I was so excited.

FINGERS: I am Fingers McGee, but I don't know anything about renting a room from you. I'm here to look for my cousin. Her name is Helen, but I guess she's been going by Helene since she arrived in Grant County. She has worked in a jewelry store before, so I thought she might have come here seeking employment.

MARY: There isn't a Helen or a Helene working here, but there is a young lady named Helene renting the room above yours. She moved in a few weeks ago.

FINGERS: I'm renting a room at Ma Jingle's Boarding House, not a room here. I don't know who's pulling a prank or why, but I definitely can't pay to rent two places--nor would I need to. I'm quite content at Ma Jingle's. I'm sorry if you've lost money.

MARY: Oh, we've not lost money. The apartment was paid for by your uncle, who called and arranged the rental and then paid promptly via Western Union. In fact, we've been waiting for you to move in. It was paid for a month several days ago. My father owns the building. He's very proud to own a three-story building.

FINGERS: I need to get to the bottom of this. I only have one uncle, and I can't imagine why he would have rented a room for me. Helen--Helene--is his daughter. He's not free with his money at all. He's a widower, and he makes very little working at the Ft. Wayne Rescue Mission. Do you have a telephone I might use, Miss Anderson? I need to make a call to see if I can get some answers.

MARY: Please. Call me Mary. Here is our business telephone; you are welcome to use it for a short call.

FINGERS: I won't be long. *[Places his call]* Harvey, I need you to go to the Rescue Mission and speak to my uncle. Tell him I'm pretty sure I'm on Helen's trail--and then ask him if he rented a room above a jewelry store in Marion using my name.

... That's what I think, too, but I can't imagine why someone is pretending to be me. I don't know many people here. ...Yes, I do know the Jingle women, but what reason would they have to rent a room in my name? I'm paying them to stay in their house. If I move out, their income goes way down. ... No, I figured you hadn't gotten a solid lead for Mr. Jingle yet, but keep working. Bye.

MARY: That sounded so intriguing!

FINGERS: Do you always listen in on private conversations?

MARY: You were using my telephone. How could I miss it?

FINGERS: Well, now that you're a little informed and a lot intrigued, would you like to help me out?

MARY: At the Hotspot?

FINGERS: To be honest, Mary, my advice is that a nice young lady like you should stay away from the Hotspot.

MARY: I only went to see my friend, Bella, perform. She dates the owner, so I got in free.

FINGERS: She dates--?

MARY: The owner. Your boss. Bootsy Branson.

FINGERS: Well, isn't that interesting.... How long has that been going on?

MARY: Oh, gosh...as long as the Hotspot has been open. That's why Bella works there. She says it's only temporary, though, until Bootsy saves up enough money to buy her a little farm in Scranton, P.A.. Bella *loves* animals.

FINGERS: *[Under his breath]* Evidently. *[Full voice]* The job I need you to do is here and very important. If you hear anyone moving around in the apartment rented in my name, pay attention to the time, the noises, and--if you can--who it is. Can you do that?

MARY: Anything for you, Mr. Fingers--as long as you don't tell my father I was at the Hotspot! I'm not supposed to hang out with Bella. My father says she's "fast."

FINGERS: Your father sounds like a very smart man.. *[Starts to leave]* Did Helen--Helene--tell you anything about her job? There can't be many places in this town who would hire a young lady.

MARY: She didn't say where her job was, but she said her mother would be proud. Does that make sense?

FINGERS: Not really, unless there is a music school nearby.

MARY: The Marion Conservatory of Music would be a place to start.

FINGERS: Where would that be?

MARY: It's on the corner of 7th and Washington. If that is where Helene is, it's definitely close enough for her to walk from here.

FINGERS: Mary, you've been quite a help today. If you ever decide to get out of the jewelry business and into the private investigator business, you're a natural.

MARY: And if you ever decide to stop playing the piano, maybe you could get a real career.

Scene Eight--The Marion Conservatory of Music

FINGERS: *Entering* Hello, Miss/Ma'am [whichever makes sense for the actor]. I'm interested in getting my young daughter some piano and vocal lessons.

RUTH: You've come to the right place. We have some of the finest musical instructors in the Midwest. You know, Cole Porter studied here.

FINGERS: That is certainly something to keep in mind. My, uh, daughter is young and is very shy around men that she doesn't know. Do you have any female instructors?

RUTH: It's funny you should ask. We very recently hired a young lady who can instruct in both piano and voice. Her name is Miss Helene. Would you like to meet her?

FINGERS: She sounds exactly like what I am looking for. Yes.

RUTH: If you would like to see one of her children's choir classes, there is one finishing up now. They are probably working on their last song for their Christmas recital.

FINGERS: That sounds too good to be true, honestly.

RUTH: Let me notify her by intercom. *[Flips switch]* Miss Helene, we have a guest who would like to hear your children's choir. May we come back?

HELEN: *[Voice from backstage over the intercom]* I will bring the children out.

RUTH: I'm sure you will find Miss Helene's students well-trained.

FINGERS: I have no doubts.

Helen enters with her children's choir. She really doesn't look at Daniel at all because she is so busy lining up the children. She gives the children their beginning notes, and they sing "The Coventry Carol."

FINGERS: *[Applauding after the children stop]* That was lovely. It reminded me of my childhood.

HELEN: *[Turns and sees Daniel. Hugs him]* What are you doing here?

RUTH: Miss Helene! For what reason are you so familiar with this gentleman?

HELEN: This is no gentleman! This is my cousin, Danny.

RUTH: Well, since he's family...I suppose your exuberance is forgivable. Children, grab your outside clothing. Your class time is over, and I am sure your families are ready to take you home. *[Trying to rush the children out]*

FINGERS: Children, you were very impressive. You even made Miss Helene look good. *[The children laugh and leave.]*

HELEN: Danny, what are you doing here?

FINGERS: Shouldn't I be asking you that same question, **Miss Helene?**

HELEN: I suppose my father told you I left?

FINGERS: Why else do you think I'm here? I've been trying to find you.

HELEN: I made a mistake, Danny--but my father made one, too. When Mother died, he wanted us to die with her. Not literally, but emotionally. He didn't want laughter in the house anymore. He didn't want music in the house anymore. I couldn't make him understand that taking music away from me was like having her die all over again...so I left.

FINGERS: He's frantic with worry about you, Helen. Whether he knows how to show you or not, he loves you.

HELEN: I know he loves me, Danny, but love without understanding doesn't go very far.

FINGERS: Evidently it can go 60 miles.

HELEN: What are you trying to say?

FINGERS: Helen, you left without telling him good-bye; you left without telling him you were going. Those aren't things you do when you love someone.

HELEN: No, they aren't. *[Beat]* I told you; I made a mistake, but he did, too. *[Beat]* Do you think it's too late to patch things up?

FINGERS: Helen, if it were, do you think he would have sent me looking for you? Are you ready to go home?

HELEN: I can't go quite yet. The children are depending on me for their Christmas recital...but I would love to be home by New Year's Day.

FINGERS: I think that will work out just fine.

HELEN: What about you? I guess you can go back to Ft. Wayne on the next train since you found me.

FINGERS: Uhhh, not quite yet. I have some unfinished business here, too. I guess we can take the same train back. What do you say?

HELEN: It's a deal! What else are you doing here besides looking for me?

FINGERS: It's a little complicated. How about if we go back to your room above Anderson's so that I have plenty of time to tell you what all is going on before I have to go to the Hotspot.

HELEN: The Hotspot? In Herbst? Why would you go to such a depraved place?

FINGERS: That's one of the things we need to talk about. I have a feeling you might be able to help me wrap up one of my loose ends here in Marion.

HELEN: If it has anything to do with making sure that Bootsie Branson gets what's coming to him, count me in.

FINGERS: It does, and welcome to the staff of Daniel Malone Investigations, Inc.

Helen and Fingers shake hands and then laugh and hug. They exit together.

Curtain

Act Three

Scene Nine--Gary the Goat's Office

Randy is the only one on stage when the scene begins. He is dressed in a Santa suit.

RANDY: All, right, you red hots. Get out here so I can see you in your Kringle costumes.

One by one, each one more sheepish and miserable than the one before, the rest of the gangsters from I,v--minus Gary, Bootsy, and Bob--enter in Santa suits.

LEFTY: I am wholeheartedly embarrassed..

PAULIE: As am I.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

RANDY: Where's Big Bob? *[Bob enters with a spring in his step and a smile on his face.]*
The rest of you plugs are out here looking like it's your funeral, but not Bob. Are you okay with this, Bob?

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

RANDY: That's the spirit. Now, we need to practice our jovial holiday laughter before Gary and Bootsy get here. I'm gonna direct. Watch me. When I count off "one, two," you give your best "ho, ho, ho." Ready?

Randy counts off like he is saying, "One, two, cha-cha-cha." None of the men get it right other than Bob.

RANDY: Bob! Show 'em how it's done!

BOB *[Belches]* Sure. One, two, ho, ho, ho.

RANDY: Let's try it again. *[He directs. There is minimal improvement.]* One, two, ho, ho, ho. Again! One, two, ho, ho, ho. That's better! Keep it goin'! One, two, ho, ho, ho. One, two, ho, ho, ho! One, two, ho, ho, ho!

As the gangster Santas start to enjoy themselves, they form a conga line and circle the room with Bob leading and Randy last. Gary and Bootsie enter unnoticed by the others and watch in a state of shock for a few moments.

GARY: Just when I thought I had seen almost everything--

The men stop abruptly other than Bob, who is enjoying himself immensely and either doesn't hear Gary or doesn't care.

BOOTSIE: What. In. The. World? You guys having fun?

BOB: *[Stops. Belches]* Sure.

GARY: This better have something to do with Christmas Eve.

LEFTY: I wholeheartedly assure you it does.

PAULIE: As do I.

RANDY: I concur.

ARLO: Absolutely.

BOB: *[Belches]* Sure.

BOOTSIE: Good to know. Okay, so we need some sort of sign we can use during the swindle. Who has the loudest "Ho, ho, ho?"

GARY: *[Turns away, mumbling to himself]* How did my life come to this?

BOOTSIE: Let's hear 'em. One by one. Lefty, you start.

LEFTY: Ho. Ho, ho-ho!

PAULIE: Ho-ho! Ho-ho!

RANDY: Ho, ho, ho?

ARLO: Ho, ho-ho, ho, ho!

BOB: *[Authentically and robustly]* Ho, ho, ho! Ho ho, ho! Ho, ho, ho!

GARY: Ho, ho, hold on! Big Bob is definitely the winner--Arlo, you're second place!

The others gather around Big Bob and--to a lesser extent--Arlo to congratulate them as if they are Miss America and 1st runner up. Bootsy does give them a bit of time for the congratulations but then breaks up the lovefest.

BOOTSY: All right! Break it up! Here's how this is gonna go. Each one of you five-finger Kringles is gonna be on the courthouse square with "donation" cans. Might as well work that angle, too. Any coins you get you can keep and use as you wish. Bob, you'll be posted in the middle of the block, right in front of Anderson's and the bank; each of the others will be on a street corner. After the bank and Anderson's are both closed and cleared, Bob is gonna let loose with one of his huge ho, ho, ho's, and that will be the signal for you all to head casually to your appointed heist location. Bob--Randy and Paulie will join you in the cellar. Arlo, you'll stay out front of Anderson's with your can, just in case someone starts acting funny. If anything seems to be goin' south, Arlo will let loose with his ho, ho, ho's, since he came in first runner up.

ARLO: What are Lefty and Gary doing?

BOOTSY: Helping with the jewelry heist. They will be in the apartment rented in the piano player's name, and I will arrive via the fire escape when it's safe to do so. I'm starting a hole in the ceiling tonight, so they can start without me. In fact, I'm going there now.

GARY: Once again, I must commend you for this plan. *[Eyes narrowing]* If I didn't trust you *so much*, I might think you are trying to take over my territory. Of course, anybody and everybody knows that would be a decision of disastrous proportions.

BOOTSY: If I didn't trust **you** so much, you think I would let you start without me? I think you're exactly the person who should be in charge of the rackets in Grant County.

GARY: See that it stays that way.

BOOTSY: Believe you me: I could hop on a train in a couple days and leave all this behind, knowing full well that you wouldn't need me to run the game.

GARY: That's what I like to hear.

BOOTSY: I know you do.

Scene Ten--Anderson's Jewelry Store

FINGERS: Mary, I assure you that it is acceptable and safe for me to go upstairs with Helen. She's my cousin.

MARY: I'm sorry, Daniel, but my father has very strict rules about the rooms he rents.

FINGERS: Oh, for goodness sakes... Well, is it all right if we sit together on this bench and carry on our discussion?

MARY: Hold on. *[Grabs a book to put between them when they sit down.]* Go ahead. *[When they sit, she slips the book between them.]* There. Acceptable.

Mary loiters near them, waiting expectantly for the conversation to begin.

FINGERS: Uh...Mary?

MARY: There's not room for me to sit, so I have to stand.

FINGERS: Mary! This is not a public conversation.

MARY: Then why are you having it in public?

FINGERS: *[Fingers is thwarted by her "logic."]* You might as well listen. I did ask you to keep your ears open.

MARY: And that I have!

FINGERS: So what have you heard?

MARY: Nothing. *[Beat]* But I did **see** something.

FINGERS: Okay. I'll bite. What did you see?

MARY: Bootsy Branson went up the stairs and went into one of your rooms.

FINGERS: And you were just sitting on that information?

MARY: You asked what I heard, not what I saw.

FINGERS: When was this, Mary?

MARY: Two days ago...and yesterday...and earlier today.

FINGERS: *[Flummoxed again]* Thank you, Mary? *[She shrugs with a little sass and humor as if, "Of course."* *Beat]* So, Helen, why were you so distressed to hear me mention the Herbst Hotspot?

HELEN: Oh, Danny, it's a den of sin and iniquity! How can you stand it there? People are not very pleasant there at all! Especially the owner, Bootsy Branson! Danny, he was flirtatious toward me! I was so embarrassed. I was sure that I wasn't leading him on, but why else would he be so forward?

FINGERS: Helen, I am sure that you were not presenting yourself as a chippy--

HELEN: I most certainly was not!

FINGERS: Bootsy is not a nice kind of man. The more I know about him, the less I want to be in the same room as him.

HELEN: If it hadn't been for T.A. being kind and sort of brotherly/fatherly [depends on the age of the actor] toward me, I wouldn't have worked there as long as I did. And poor Miss Judy! I wanted to tell her that Bootsy was a chiseler, but I was afraid she would think that I had led him astray.

MARY: Why would Judy care? Bootsy is dating my friend Bella, not Judy.

HELEN: Bella? Oh, no, I assure you he is dating Judy. We had more than one heart-to-heart about it.

FINGERS: Ladies, I know it doesn't seem like you could both be correct, but from what I can tell, you are. Evidently, Mr. Branson has been dating both Judy and Bella. From what I have been able to ascertain, Mr. Branson has been dating Judy openly and Bella more secretly. I can assure you that Judy doesn't know he is dating Bella, but Bella knows he is dating Judy. Why she is willing to be his clandestine chickie is beyond me, but--

MARY: It's because he's promised her all sorts of things: furs, jewelry, a cross country train trip.

HELEN: Oh! What a slippery eel! If only I had been more bold with Miss Judy, I could have saved her some heartache!

FINGERS: I'm not sure that Miss Judy can be saved from heartache entirely. But how would you two like to help me make sure that Bootsy is held accountable for his romantic misadventures?

MARY: Absolutely! Even though my dad doesn't like Bella, she's still my friend!.

HELEN: I should have taken Miss Judy into my confidence before I left the Hotspot, but this will give me a chance to make amends.

FINGERS: I must admit, I have my own reasons for wanting Mr. Branson to be made the chump this time after he's been suckering so many other people.

MARY: Speaking of Bootsy, isn't that him coming toward here right now?

HELEN: Heavens! What do we do?

FINGERS: Quick! Hide behind the counter!

BOOTSY: *[Entering and speaking to Mary]* Hey, you're a tasty treat!

MARY: Could I help you, Sir? Are you interested in some jewelry for a special lady in your life?

BOOTSY: I don't have a special lady in my life other than my ma, but that could always be changed. What I'm really here for is to pick up the spare key for the room right above this store. I'm Fingers McGee, the renter. I left my key at work, and when I rented the room, I was told I could get a spare key for an emergency in this here store.

MARY: You're not--*[punched under the counter]* ouch!--wrong about that. Let me get the key, Mr. McGee.

While Mary gets the key from a back room, Bootsy cases the store.

MARY: You'll need to bring the key back quickly; the store closes in just a few minutes.

BOOTSY: Don't you worry; I'll be right down with the key. I like the view down here.

MARY: You have the same view upstairs. Your window faces the same direction as ours.

BOOTSY: It's not the courthouse that I enjoy seeing. *[Exits]*

FINGERS: Well, well, well...the situation is starting to make more sense. As much as I hate to ask you to put yourself on Bootsy's path, please keep pretending that you think he's me. In the meantime, Helen, I need for you to ask for your job back at The Hotspot. It will only be for a couple days, and I will be there to keep an eye on you...as will T.A., if you think he can be trusted.

HELEN: Oh, yes, he's a nice man. He told me I reminded him of his kid sister. I'm sure he will help keep me safe.

FINGERS: I need you to be my eyes and ears backstage with the other girls--especially Bella and Judy. Can you do that?

HELEN: If it helps Judy get away from Bootsy and holds him responsible for his bad behavior, I will gladly help.

MARY: I hear footsteps! Duck!

BOOTSY: *[Entering]* Hey, Dollface, here's your key back. If you want to use it when you hear me upstairs, I wouldn't mind. And speaking of hearing me, you might hear some loud noises tonight because I'm, uhhh, building some furniture to give to my family and friends for Christmas gifts. You might even hear me doing some work on Christmas Eve.

MARY: Noted--but the store will be closed after 5:00 PM on the 24th, so no one will be here to hear you working after that, anyway. And now I need to lock up for the evening. If you'll excuse me--

BOOTSY: A looker like you never needs to be excused around me. Hope to see you around, babe. You're the bee's knees. *[Exits]*

HELEN: Can you believe that baloney?

FINGERS: Clearly, something is going down tomorrow night and something even bigger on the 24th. That doesn't give me much time to figure out a plan, but I will!

HELEN: I believe in you, Danny. I always have.

FINGERS: Thanks! Mary, could I use the blower? I need to check in with my uncle.

MARY: Sure. I'm just gonna take care of closing duties. *[She begins to take jewelry to the back room, tray by tray.]*

FINGERS: *[Makes call]* Yes, I need to speak to Charles Malone. ... I'll hold. ... Uncle Charlie, I have some good news for you. ... I sure did! ... Yes, she's fine. She's standing right here beside me. Do you want to speak to her? ... Yes, I am sure she wants to speak to you. *[Hands Helen the phone]*

HELEN: *[Hesitates slightly]* Hi. It's Helen. ... I'm sorry, too! ... I have some loose ends to tie up here, but I will be back by New Years--if you'll have me. ... Thank you, Daddy. ... Merry Christmas to you, too. *[Hands phone back to Fingers]*

FINGERS: It's me again, Uncle Charlie. ... Sure, she's fine. She's just a little emotional. ... I can barely hear you over the music in the background. Are you having a holiday party? That's a nice rendition of "Silent Night." ... Really? I thought it was a recording. That's one of your men at the Mission playing and singing? He's very impressive. ... Seven months? And all he knows is his first name? What is his first name? ... James. Really? Uncle Charlie, call him "Mr. Jingle," and see if he reacts. ... Aw, gee, I didn't mean to make him cry--but I know who he is, and I know that his family wants him back. Can you put him on the next train to Marion if I wire you the money? ... Perfect! Thanks, Uncle Charlie! *[Hangs up]* Do you believe in Christmas miracles, girls? Because this has to be one--or else we're starring in one of those feel-good movies that has a surprising yet completely convenient happy ending with all the major loose ends tied up!

Scene Eleven--Ma Jingle's Boarding House

MA: *[As Fingers enters]* Hello, Daniel, and happy holidays to you!

FINGERS: You sound chipper today, Mildred.

MA: I woke up this morning with a song in my heart.

FINGERS: Was it "Silent Night," by any chance?

MA: It was! When you and Judy sang it together, it filled me with hope and happiness that I haven't felt for quite a while.

FINGERS: Seven months or so, I would guess.

MA: Yes, of course. I miss my Jimmy.

FINGERS: Don't lose hope. I'm still working the case, you know.

MA: Yes, you're a good boy, Daniel.

FINGERS: Is Judy here?

MA: She is. Give her a yell; I don't mind.

FINGERS: *[Yells toward the hallway]* Judy? Will you come down here?

MA: I can leave you two alone if you need a little private time.

FINGERS: That won't be necessary, Mildred. *[Beat]* Why would Judy and I need time alone?

MA: Daniel, it's pretty obvious to me that you're more interested in Judy than just as a coworker...and I'm okay with it. You're definitely more what I want for her than what she has.

FINGERS: It's that obvious, huh? I appreciate your support, but I'm afraid she has no interest in me.

MA: Don't be so sure, my boy.

JUDY: *[Entering]* Do you want me? *[Realizes what she said]* I mean, did you call for me?

FINGERS: I need to talk to you about something rather important. Let's sit.

MA: As I said, I can go to the kitchen or--

FINGERS: Please, Mildred, I think it's better if you stay. A girl needs her mother in a time like this, I would think. *[Mildred sits]* Judy, I don't know how to soften the blow, so I'm just going to come right out and say this. Bootsy has been cheating on you with Bella--

MA: I knew it!

FINGERS: And I've seen him first hand flirting with another girl, too. I'm sorry I have to be the bearer of bad news, but I can't stand by and see him treat you so unfairly. He's a shady character, and I want you to be safe when he is held accountable for whatever criminal activities he is involved in. Judy, are you going to be okay? Is there anything I can do?

Judy sits quietly for a moment and then throws herself into Fingers' arms, almost knocking him over. Fingers looks shocked while Ma nods knowingly.

FINGERS: Judy, are you crying? Or laughing?

JUDY: Maybe both. I'm not sure what to feel. I'm angry, of course--but mostly with Bella! We aren't exactly friends, but I certainly didn't think she was a back stabber.

FINGERS: Wait. You're not angry with Bootsy?

JUDY: Of course, yes--but I'm relieved that I didn't marry him! I just don't understand why he's been leading me on.

FINGERS: Judy, you're such a special girl. You don't even realize how talented you are! You're the number one draw at the Hotspot. People come back night after night to see you. I'm sure Bootsy thought he could keep you at the Hotspot as long as you were dating each other. You make him more money than Bella ever could. She's just not talented enough.

MA: She evidently has some sort of talents.

JUDY: Ma! That's not nice to say! Even if it's true, it's still not nice to say.

HELEN: *[Knocks on door]* May I come in?

JUDY: Helene! What are you doing here?

FINGERS: I guess I didn't tell you I have other news: I found my cousin. Judy, Helen has something to tell you.

HELEN: Danny! Please don't make me.

FINGERS: It needs to be said. Don't worry; it will be okay. Judy, Helen needs to tell you why she left the Hotspot so quickly.

JUDY: Go ahead, Helene. You're my friend.

HELEN: I hope so! This is just so hard. Judy, the reason I left without warning is that Mr. Branson was making advances toward me, and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to protect myself and protect our friendship, too. I thought maybe I was sending some sort of signal that I didn't know I was sending, so--

JUDY: Oh, you were. You were breathing. *[Beat]* Helene, I don't blame you at all. Mr. Bootsy Branson and I are no longer engaged--but he doesn't know it yet...not that it would make any difference in his behavior, anyway.

FINGERS: And he can't know until we figure out what he's got planned tomorrow and the next day.

MA: Daniel, could I do something? No one expects an old woman.

FINGERS: Mildred, you're not an old woman--but, yes, you might be exactly what I need to figure out some answers. I need you to apply to clean at the Hotspot. Don't worry: your employment won't last more than two days. Be sure to spread the rumor that you've decided Bootsy would be a great son-in-law.

MA: I hope I'm not struck by lightning after telling such a huge lie.

FINGERS: Helen, I need you to apply to perform there again. Then seek out Bella to see if you can get her to confide in you. Meanwhile, Judy, I need you to put the screws to Bootsy. Tell him now that your mother is onboard with him marrying you, you want to get married right away. Tell him Christmas night sounds good to you since the Hotspot will be closed. Make sure Bella hears your plan. We need her riled up.

MA: This is so exciting! I feel like I should be carrying a gat and chugging down giggle water in a gin mill, waiting for the fuzz to show up and tell the goons to grab some air! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

JUDY: Daniel, I hope this only takes a couple days. I don't know how much more of **that** I can take.

FINGERS: I promised my uncle that Helen would be back by New Years. I think this is all going to be taken care of by December 26th.

JUDY: For all our sakes, I hope so.

As the lights go down, Ma is still "shooting" her machine gun while Judy, Helen, and Fingers look on with a sense of amusement or embarrassment.

Scene Twelve--Anderson's Jewelry Store

BOOTSY: Hello, Miss. You remember me, right? Fingers McGee? Your upstairs tenant?

MARY: Oh, yes, Sir. I know exactly who you are.

BOOTSY: I know when I spoke to you yesterday, I said I did not have anyone to buy jewelry for--but I was wondering if you have all your jewelry out right now, or if there is some put back for your wealthiest customers. My employer, Bootsy Branson, still needs to do some Christmas shopping, and I told him I would check...since I live upstairs and all. He could definitely afford your best, but he doesn't want to take all you have if you're limited.

MARY: We do have loose jewels that have not yet been put into settings, but for the most part, all our jewelry is on display from when we open in the morning until we close at night.

BOOTSY: Speaking of opening and closing, what will be your hours of operation on Christmas Eve? I'm sure my boss, Mr. Branson, will want to know. He wants to be able to shop locally. He's very civic-minded, you know.

MARY: The store will open Christmas Eve day at 10:00 and will close at 5:00.

BOOTSY: That will work perfectly for the sca--plan. Thanks, Dollface! *[Starts to exit]* By the way, do you know the hours the bank next door will be open on Christmas Eve?

MARY: The same hours as ours. We like to coordinate whenever possible.

BOOTSY: You've been so very helpful. Maybe Santa Claus will put a little something extra in your stocking this year. I sure would if I were him. *[Blows a kiss]* If I don't see you again during the next couple of days, Merry Christmas. *[Exits]*

MARY: *[After checking to make sure Bootsy is gone, picks up phone]* Get me Ma Jingle's Boarding House. Yes, I'll hold.... Mrs. Jingle? This is Mary Anderson. Is Fingers McGee there? I need to pass along some information. ... Oh, good. ... Mr. Malone, I'm pretty sure I know at least part of what Bootsy Branson is up to, and I think the jewelry store and the bank next door are prime targets for a Christmas Eve heist. ... I'll come to the Hotspot now.

Scene Thirteen--The Herbst Hotspot

(The scene begins mid-story; T.A. and Fingers are finishing a conversation.)

FINGERS: So, can I count on you?

T.A.: You better believe it. I hate what has happened to all these nice young ladies. It's bad enough when an old guy like me has to deal with the Bootsy Bransons of the world, but these ladies definitely deserve better.

FINGERS: All the hiring updates have been made?

T.A.: Yep. Mrs. Jingle is the new cleaning lady, which means she can be anywhere in the club without drawing attention. Helen is starting with the Belles tonight. And as soon as Mr. Jingle gets back in town, he'll be our act when the girls go on break.

FINGERS: You sure none of this will raise a red flag with Bootsy?

T.A.: You know as well as I do that Bootsy has been spending less and less time here this past week. I doubt if he even noticed Helen was gone, so it won't make a difference she's back. As for the other two--

FINGERS: Shhh... Here come the girls.

JUDY: *[Loudly]* Oh, yes, it's just a matter of a couple of days before Bootsy and I say our "I do's." Once my mother changed her mind, no roadblocks existed.

HELEN: *[Also loudly]* I'm so happy for you, Judy!

BELLA: *(Entering after them)* What is she doing back?

JUDY: Who? Helene? Someone has to be able to take my spot when Bootsy and I go on our honeymoon in a couple days. She agreed to help out.

BELLA: When you what?

JUDY: When Bootsy and I go on our honeymoon. It's all arranged. We were just waiting until my mother gave in, and she has, so there's no reason to wait. After all, Bootsy has been determined to marry me since I first started here. Why wait?

BELLA: When did you and Bootsy make this decision?

JUDY: Oh, we haven't yet. I'll tell him as soon as he gets here--but I know it won't be a problem. After all, he's been wanting to marry me for over six months. *[Bootsy enters]* Here he is now. Guess what, Bootsy? Ma said "yes," so we're getting married Christmas night! I hope your glad rags are ready.

BOOTSYSY: Uh, this is so sudden, Judy. Shouldn't we take a little time to invite our friends, hire some musicians?

JUDY: Don't be silly, Honey. All I have of family is Ma now that my dad is gone. And you don't have any family left. That's what you told me, right? You're an orphan, right? Besides, all our friends are here at the Hotspot, and we have musicians here, too.

BOOTSYSY: We don't have a minister.

JUDY: That's all right. I already talked to Sergeant Brown of the Salvation Army. He says he would be glad to officiate.

BOOTSYSY: What about people to be witnesses? We hafta have witnesses, right?

JUDY: All the Belles can be my bridesmaids--and Bella, you can be my maid of honor, since I've known you longer than the others. What do you think?

BELLA: I'm definitely overwhelmed with emotion right now.

JUDY: I'll take that as a yes!

BOOTSYSY: What about a pretty dress? And a ring?

JUDY: I'm gonna wear my mother's wedding dress! And I heard Anderson's Jewelry Store is going to be open on Christmas Eve, so you can get a ring there. I don't need anything fancy, Bootsy--a carat or two will do.

BOOTSYSY: A. Carat. Or. Two?

JUDY: Unless you want to get me something bigger! I wouldn't mind. *[Bella leaves quickly as Judy throws her arms around Bootsy.]* Aren't you excited, Farmer Bootsy? I can't wait to be your little milkmaid!

BOOTSYSY: You'll have to wait a little while, now won't you? Excuse me a second. *[Exits in the direction of Bella]*

JUDY: You think he bought it?

FINGERS: To tell you the truth, I thought it was a little too believable. What if he's willing to go through with it?

T.A.: He's not going through with anything other than a scam to get out of town. Did you see how he ran out of here as soon as he could to follow Bella?

HELEN: I'm gonna be so happy when Mr. Branson gets his comeuppance.

JUDY: That was so fun! Watching him squirm! Thanks for trusting me with such an important part of this scheme, Daniel. *[Hugs him impulsively]*

FINGERS: My pleasure.

T.A.: Daniel? Who's Daniel?

FINGERS: I've got some explaining to do.

Scene Fourteen--A hallway of the Herbst Hotspot

BOOTSY: Bella, baby!

BELLA: Don't you "Bella, baby" me.

BOOTSY: Nothing you heard in there is what is going to happen. Our plans haven't changed. We're going to vamoose out of here just the way we planned. I don't even know where Judy got all those ideas. You know I've just been leading her on to keep the money rolling in here. For some reason, people like the little sap.

BELLA: People? Or *you*?

BOOTSY: Sweetheart! Think about how much time I've spent with you since she came along. It's not like you've been neglected. She just **thought** we were dating. You know it's been me and you all along, right? In just two days, we will be on our way to Scranton, P.A. How's that for a Christmas present? Just what you wanted, right?

BELLA: Just what I wanted.

BOOTSY: Now, have you made that anonymous "concerned citizen" call yet?

BELLA: Just waitin' for you to give me the signal.

BOOTSY: Go ahead and do it now. Look, I'll even spring for the dime for the pay phone. You know what to say, right?

BELLA: Absolutely.

BOOTSY: I've gotta dust out for a bit, but I'll be here for tonight's late show. Then
tomorrow, after the early show, we'll make the clean sneak and be on our way. I'm
dizzy with you. You know that.

BELLA: Sure, Bootsy. I know just how you feel about me. And I feel the same way about
you.

BOOTSY: That's my girl! *[Blows her a kiss]* See you, Dollface. *[Exits]*

MARY: *[Steps out of the shadows]* Do you believe me now?

BELLA: I sure do.

MARY: He couldn't even be clever enough to come up with an original line. He called
me "Dollface" earlier today.

BELLA: I can't believe how stupid I was. Just call me blind Bella.

MARY: Don't say that. He's been bad news for many people--not just you. You and
Judy both fell for his line, but you're gonna get your revenge. You ready to make
your call, Miss "Concerned Citizen?"

BELLA: I sure am. I'm gonna make him pay--and he's paying for the call. *[Puts the dime
in a payphone]* Hello? Police? I am a concerned citizen, and I would like to
report that some crimes are going to be committed in Grant County on Christmas
Eve. The ringleader of the crime spree is a small-time crook with big-time
aspirations. His name is Bootsy Branson.

Scene Fifteen--The Herbst Hotspot

The setup is like it was in scene one, with the flashing lights and showtime glitz.

T.A.: It's that time again, ladies and gentlemen! Here they are, Judy Jingle and
her Belles!

*Judy and the Belles sing and dance to a speakeasy-styled rendition of "Up on the Housetop."
While that is going on, James Jingle walks into the club. He speaks to T.A., who then gestures
to Fingers. Fingers nods and finishes the song with a flourish. The girls leave the stage.*

TA: Place your drink orders while we take a break. If you don't, who will? Or place your bets with Lucky Louie in the back room. He still needs to do his Christmas shopping. *[Rim shot]*

JAMES: Mr. Malone?

FINGERS: Mr. Jingle?

T.A.: Well, that was enlightening. Are you both who you say you are?

JAMES: I hope so. *[Simultaneously]*

FINGERS: I hope so. *[Simultaneously]*

T.A.: No wonder Judy has a soft spot for you, Fingers. You're a lot like her dad.

FINGERS: Believe it or not, she said the same thing to me.

T.A.: Are you ready, Mr. Jingle?

JAMES: I think so. Yes.

FINGERS: Have a seat.

JAMES: *[Sits at the piano]* Are Mildred and Judy both here?

FINGERS: I bet you're about to find out.

T.A.: Live from his most-recent gig in Ft. Wayne, let's welcome Juice Joint Jimmy, with his favorite holiday song.

After a few bars of James' singing and playing "Silent Night," Ma comes out and sees who is performing and then runs in the direction of Judy's dressing room. Moments later, they appear, stunned by the miracle unfolding before them. James finishes and looks up from the piano, noticing his wife and daughter for the first time. He runs to them and hugs them.

T.A.: The clock on the wall says it's time for your eyelids to fall. Those of you who are regulars at this gin mill, this would be the perfect opportunity for you to give your waitress a holiday bonus--because we sure aren't. *[Rim shot]* *[To Fingers]* Nice job. I'm glad I didn't place a bet on you finding Mr. Jingle, 'cuz I woulda lost.

FINGERS: I can't take much credit at all. It's more like Mr. Jingle found my uncle.

T.A.: Well, whatever you did, good job.

FINGERS: Thanks. As long as tonight and tomorrow work the way I hope they will, everyone except Bootsy Branson and his gang of guns will be having a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

T.A.: And if it doesn't work out the way you hope it will?

FINGERS: The girl I love will end up married to a hoodlum, the bank and the jewelry store will be sitting empty, and we'll all be left to pick up the pieces.

T.A.: You can't cross your fingers; those are your meal tickets. But I can. Can we trust everyone involved?

FINGERS: If we can't, it's too late now.

Scene Sixteen--Ma Jingle's Boarding House

Helen, Fingers, Mildred, Judy, Mary, Bella, and James are all sitting in the room. The scene picks up mid-scene.

FINGERS: So, what is the last thing you remember when you got off the train?

JAMES: Someone came up behind me and said, "Stay out of the basement," and the next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital in Ft. Wayne with a huge lump on my head. I didn't know who I was, so they sent me to the Mission.

MA: Stay out of the basement? We don't even have a basement--

FINGERS: But the post office does...and right after you were attacked in Ft. Wayne, Bootsy opened the Hotspot in the post office basement.

JUDY: Are you saying that Bootsy not only led me on and cheated on me but he had my father waylaid, too, just to open a speakeasy in Herbst?

HELEN: It sure sounds like it. I'm so glad that my father was able to offer you shelter at the Mission, Mr. Jingle. He's a good man.

JAMES: That he is, Miss Helen. He kept me sane and safe for several months. I owe him a debt of gratitude beyond any I could ever repay.

FINGERS: Mary, what was the news you wanted to pass along from the jewelry store?

MARY: Bootsy came in again to the jewelry store, thinking he was being so clever-- asking questions about our hours tomorrow and what hours the bank would be open. After he walked out, he went down into the cellar, and after I saw him leave, I went down to look around. There had definitely been some digging going on. There was some freshly turned dirt.

FINGERS: So, I think that's pretty easy to interpret.

MARY: Yes. We have a mole infestation. *[Beat]* But what matters now is I think there's going to be a robbery attempted from the bank vault and from the jewelry store after we both close up tomorrow night.

FINGERS: Mildred, did you find out anything while you were cleaning the club?

MA: I had a chance to do quite a bit of snooping in Bootsy's office. I found all sorts of bills and invoices that are coming due at the end of the month. My guess is that Bootsy thinks he'll be long gone and leave other people holding the bag. In fact, quite a few of the bills were addressed to a man named Gary. Bootsy's real first name isn't Gary, is it?

JUDY: He would never tell me his real first name--but I've heard him talk about a Gary the Goat before, so I wonder if that's who the bills are for.

MA: If so, it looks like this Gary is going to be left holding the bag on a lot of bills. Speaking of being left holding the bag, while I was snooping, I was given a bag full of Santa Claus costumes by a very unhappy looking guy who said his name was Randy. He walked into Bootsy's office and nearly gave me a case of the heebie jeebies. He said Bootsy would know what the costumes were for. Judy, are you doing a number in Santa suits for Christmas Eve? If so, I need to go get those costumes and hang them on the line. They smell like they've been worn by bindle stiffs.

JUDY: We have a new number planned for tomorrow night, but it doesn't require Santa suits.

FINGERS: We've put quite a few pieces of the puzzle together, but I'm stumped by how Santa suits figure in. If only we had a true inside person who could explain what the suits are for...someone Bootsy ran his mouth to...someone that he thought was just as much of a sharper as he thinks he is but who really dislikes him and is just waiting to give out the goods...

All heads turn toward Bella, who is sitting with her head down until she senses everyone looking at her.

BELLA: I can explain.

Scene Seventeen--Outside Anderson's Jewelry Store

The children from Helen's choir sing "Toyland." Fingers stands in the shadows. After the song, Bob lets loose with his award-winning "Ho, ho, ho." One by one, the Santa-dressed hoods appear and gather outside the store. Before they can disperse to their heist assignments, Helen's children's choir members swoop in and attach themselves to all the pseudo Santas, handing them Christmas lists, trying to sit on their laps, hugging their legs, jumping on their backs, etc. As each of the Santas manages to break away from a child, Helen ushers the children off one by one, and then one at a time, Bootsy's criminals are cornered and/or manipulated into the wings by the "parents" of Helen's choir members. The parents are being played by James, Ma, T.A., Fingers, and Mary. One at a time, the "parents" come back on stage wearing the Santa suit of the criminal each one jumped. Officer Washington enters.

OFFICER: What do we have here?

FINGERS: Officer, my name is Daniel Malone. I'm a private detective from Ft. Wayne. I believe you received a telephone call from a concerned citizen about a potential series of criminal activities on Christmas Eve. This group of ragtag Santas you see before you averted a bank robbery just now. You will find the yeggs who were trying to break in to the bank tied up neatly and waiting for the paddy wagon. Meantime, you will probably be able to apprehend a crime figure known as Gary the Goat if you walk up those stairs to the room for rent that is right above the jewelry store. Your best chance is to knock on the door and say you're Lefty. After that, the arrest should be very easy.

BELLA: *[Enters]* Officer, I'm the concerned citizen who called. These men are small potatoes compared to the mastermind of the whole plot: Bootsy Branson. Currently, he's in the cellar of the Herbst post office, running a speakeasy and illegal gambling operation. Time is of the essence because Mr. Branson is planning to sneak away later tonight. Are you willing to deputize these fine helpers who have already saved the bank and the jewelry store so that we can help you haul in these skid rogues and then hurry to Herbst to keep Bootsy Branson from getting away?

OFFICER: Why should I believe you? How do I know all of you are on the up and up?

JAMES: Officer, I'm James Jingle, postmaster of the Herbst post office. "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." Of course you can trust me.

OFFICER: You do have a point.

JAMES: An arrest of this size will definitely put you in line for a promotion. Single-handedly, you are going to bring all these crooks and their ringleader to justice.

OFFICER: It won't be single-handed if I deputize all you folks.

FINGERS: How about Mr. Jingle then? Deputize him and there'll be a postmaster **and** a town marshal in Herbst.

OFFICER: That does make some sense. All right. Mr. Jingle, raise your right hand and take this pledge. I, James Jingle,...

JAMES: I, James Jingle,...

OFFICER: ...accept that I am a deputy in Grant County, Indiana,...

JAMES: ...accept that I am a deputy in Grant County, Indiana,...

OFFICER: ...until I'm not. Amen.

JAMES: ...until I'm not. Amen?

OFFICER: Okay. Good enough for me. Officer Jingle, let's go apprehend Gary the Goat. And here I thought I wouldn't enjoy working on Christmas Eve. This is a lot more fun than working on Arbor Day! *[Beat]* The rest of you, I'll be out to Herbst as soon as the deputy and I drop off this first set of fugitives. Do you have a plan for apprehending Mr. Branson?

FINGERS: *[Audibly gulps--almost a belch]* Sure.

Scene Eighteen--The Hotspot

The mood is especially festive at the speakeasy on Christmas Eve. The scene should be similar to that of Act I, scene i, but perhaps with some red and green lights added. T.A. is still dressed as Santa. Bootsy is sitting at a special side table, visible to the audience and the performers. He looks happy and confident. Judy is sitting with him. She is wearing a red, fur-trimmed cape that masks her costume underneath.

T.A.: Welcome, women and men, to the Herbst Hotspot! I would say “ladies and gentlemen,” but then I wouldn’t be talkin’ to any of you, now would I? *[Rimshof]* We’ve gotta show for you tonight, the likes of which you have never seen and will probably never see again. Let’s start things out with a rousing tap number by our own Mistle-toes!

A tap group takes the stage and dances to the “March of the Toy Soldiers.” The dancers are dressed as toy soldiers. As the song continues, T.A. helps Fingers add costume pieces so that he looks like a toy soldier, too. At the end of the song, James steps in wearing a Santa suit still. When Bootsy sees him, he begins looking less confident.

T.A.: Our next number features our favorite songbird, Miss Judy Jingle; our own piano player, Fingers McGee; and a special appearance by a former Hotspot hottie, Miss Helene. Take it away!

Judy takes off her cape to reveal that she is dressed as the ballerina on top of a jewelry box. Fingers and Judy go on stage and sing “Toyland,” accompanied by Helen. While the song is going on, Mary enters, still wearing her Santa suit. She stands near an exit while James moves closer to Bootsy. Bootsy starts to squirm and look at the exits while still trying to look like he’s enjoying the show.

T.A.: Our next act features our delightful back up Belles for Judy, who are soon going to be called Bella and her Belles, since Judy will be retiring tomorrow night after she becomes Mrs. Bootsy Branson. Isn’t that right, Bootsy?

Ma enters, still wearing her Santa suit, and stands very close to Bootsy. Bootsy is trying to signal T.A. to stop talking about the wedding while still trying to play to Judy. Bella and the Belles enter, dressed as baby dolls and sing and dance to “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas.” During this, Bootsy continues to panic and look to see if he can make an exit. He’s also trying to convince Bella via gestures and facial expressions that the wedding is not really happening.

T.A.: We have only one more number tonight, and it’s gonna knock your socks off. Very recently, a group of local men found themselves singing about all sorts of things, and we’ve decided to bring them here tonight to sing some more. Let’s give a warm greeting to Officer Washington’s Ragtime Gang!

Paulie the Pigeon, Randy the Rat, Anchovy Arlo, Big Bob. Gary the Goat, and Lefty Larry all shuffle in, chained together, wearing long underwear (except for Gary, who was not in a Santa suit) and reindeer headbands. Officer Washington brings up the rear. He orders them to sing, and they offer up a very unwilling rendition of “Up on the Rooftop.” Bob and Arlo sing the “ho, ho, ho’s,” seeming fairly happy about their contributions. As Bootsy realizes the jig is up, he

tries to escape in various ways, but he is blocked by the performers and the Santas. At the end of the song, Bootsy is sitting with his head in his hands.

OFFICER: Percival Branson, show yourself! *[Ad libs about his name being "Percival"]*

BOOTSY: *[Raises his hand while his head is still down]* I'm over here.

OFFICER: Stand and be a man! I am hereby here to charge you with some charges. *[Pulls out a paper folded in accordion style Only one fold is showing right now.]* You've been charged with renting a room using a false identity.

BOOTSY: *[Looking relieved]* That's it? I can explain--

OFFICER: *[Unfurls the paper]* No, that's not "it." I have more.

BOOTSY: *[When he sees the length of the paper and looks around and sees Bella, Judy, etc.]* Just put the cuffs on me. I'll plead guilty to everything. Just get me out of here. These people look really angry.

OFFICER: My pleasure. Happy holidays, everyone! *[Shoves Bootsy out in front of him while the chain gang follows behind him. Pops head back in after exit]* By the way, this is a speakeasy, and it's gotta be shut down.

JAMES: Can it be open as long as it's on the up and up and no liquor is served?

OFFICER: Ask the postmaster; that would be his decision.

JAMES: *[Turns one way and then the other to designate he's talking to "himself"]* Amen? Amen! *[Beat]* Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Ma Jingles' Bakery and Hash House! We'll have singing and dancing shows six days a week--with no corn liquor but plenty of cornmeal mush and fresh cream, not to mention Ma Jingle's warm out of the oven cookies! Is that okay with you, T.A.?

T.A.: *[Reacts positively to James' offer and then points to an obviously pregnant young lady who has just walked in]* And when Ma isn't cooking, this here is my kid sister, Ida, who needs a job since that Paulie the Pigeon who was just in here is her shiftless husband, and I'll be taking care of her and her kids from now on.

JAMES: I'll be returning to my duties as the postmaster, Ma will be cooking and cleaning here., Judy will still be singing and dancing up a storm, as will **all** the girls--I hope.

Everyone looks at Bella, who thinks a bit and then hugs Judy and nods "yes."

JAMES: Mary is going to go back to the jewelry store--but I'm hoping I can convince her to be my bookkeeper. *[She reacts positively]* And that leaves just Helen and Fingers. Helen, do you think your dad will be willing to come here and manage Ma Jingle's Boarding House? He has experience from the Mission, and then you can stay here and keep teaching at the Conservatory of Music. I hear the kids love you.

HELEN: That would be swell! I'll ask him tomorrow when I call to wish him a merry Christmas.

JAMES: That leaves you, Fingers. Whaddya say?

FINGERS: As much as I would love to stay, I've got my real job in Ft. Wayne. I don't know... *[Looks wistfully at Judy]* I mean, I would have to have an awfully good reason to stay here...

MARY: There's a paid-up room in your name right above the jewelry store. I sure would feel safer working there by myself with a gumshoe's office upstairs.

JUDY: *[Moving over to Fingers and shyly taking hold of his hand]* You're the second-best piano player we've ever had. *[Winks at Helen]* I certainly wouldn't mind if you stayed around. It's hard for a girl these days to find a nice boy to share a soda pop with.

FINGERS: *[Hugs Judy and maybe kisses her on the cheek]* I guess I better call the Chamber of Commerce on December 26th and let them know that there's gonna be a new business on the courthouse square: Daniel Malone Investigations--the Marion office!

MA Let's all head over to the house and decorate the tree and put out milk and cookies for Santa. I have a feeling he'll be expecting quite a spread after all the gifts he's already given the sheiks and shebas in this speakeasy!

Those left on stage exit in high spirits and a sense of happiness for their lives in the new year.

THE END