

# **The Angle of Mercy**

By

Craig Gustafson

# **THE ANGLE OF MERCY**

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## **THE ANGLE OF MERCY**

*For the Daringly Freckled & Scandalously Redheaded Margie.*

*Also for the late, great Steve Schroeder,  
who played Frank Staerkel in the first workshop.*

# **THE ANGLE OF MERCY**

## **CAST – 4 MEN, 4 WOMEN**

**MARY RYAN** – 40s. Hollywood radio star. Charming, delightful and 100% logical. It's just that while most people are on board the Twentieth Century Limited, Mary's train of logic runs through Anaheim, Azusa and Cucamonga.

**ERIC RYAN** – 40s. Screenwriter. Enjoys being a straight man for Mary. A dry wit.

**CLIFF LERNER** – 30s. Rather small, with glasses. Self-effacing and shy, he plays psychotic gangsters on the screen, standing on a box opposite his leading ladies.

**RUTH LERNER** – 30s. Studio fashion designer, married to Cliff. She is witty, caustic and favors martinis. Loves Cliff but is disappointed in him.

**FRANK STAERKEL** – 40s-50s. Head of Regency Hammacher Pictures. A bombastic, bullying tyrant. (*Pronounced "STARK-el."*)

**IILA WOLVERTON** – Late 20s. A college valedictorian, Iila is cursed with sexy red hair, big blue eyes, kewpie doll face and a body that makes Rita Hayworth look like a boy. People think she's dumb. This is a mistake. (*Pronounced "EYE-la."*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE LEONI** – 30s-40s. Toughest gangster in Hollywood, on loan from Brooklyn. A *huge* movie fan. Tough, but starstruck. (*Pronounced "Lee-OWN-ee."*)

**MARILYN UZITIS** – 30s. Charlie's girlfriend. Brassy, uninhibited. Loves a good party. And booze. And sex. (*Pronounced "You-ZY-tis."*)

**PLACE:** Frank Staerke's Hollywood mansion. The study.

**TIME:** A glorious summer evening in 1947.

## **ACT ONE**

SCENE 1: 8:00 p.m. The sun is setting.

SCENE 2: Midnight.

## **ACT TWO**

SCENE 1: Immediately following.

SCENE 2: 6:30 a.m. The sun shines brightly.

## **THE ANGLE OF MERCY**

*The Angle of Mercy* premiered on April 29, 2022 at GreenMan Theatre Troupe, Elmhurst, Illinois. Director: Craig Gustafson. Stage Manager: Michelle Ho. Producer: David Soria. Fight Choreographer: Jay Battles.

### **CAST**

Mary Ryan.....	Margie Gustafson
Eric Ryan.....	John Corona
Ruth Lerner.....	Jennifer Ciombor
Cliff Lerner.....	Sean Thomas
Chinese Charlie Leoni.....	Peter Lemongelli
Marilyn Uzitis.....	Angela DeMarco
Ila Wolverton.....	Kasia Salim
Frank Staerkel.....	Neal Goldman

THE ANGLE OF MERCY

# THE ANGLE OF MERCY

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

***SETTING:** The luxurious study in Frank Staerkel's Hollywood mansion. Up Center is a large picture window, overlooking the estate. Up Right is a bathroom door. Up Left is the door to the front of the house. Down Left door leads to the foyer. Down Right leads to the back of the house. A large desk & chair at Left. The desk area is on a platform, one foot higher than the rest of the room. Three phones and a pile of scripts are on the desk. A smaller chair sits in front of the desk, below the platform, so Frank can look down on people. On the wall behind the desk are two sets of bookcases. Dividing these is a set of shelves. Upper shelves are crammed with awards, mainly from the Academy; a radio. Lower shelves are crammed with scripts. At Right is a giant fireplace. Over this is an oil painting of Frank, looking dignified but mean. In front of the fireplace is an expensive rug resting under a large sofa, a couple of comfy chairs and a love seat, surrounding a coffee table.*

***AT RISE:** 8:00 p.m. MARY RYAN is on the love seat, checking a compact mirror. She is in an expensive designer dress. ERIC RYAN paces, chewing on a cigar. He wears a white dinner jacket, a la Bogart in "Casablanca."*

**MARY.** Are you still mad at me, Eric?

**ERIC.** What do you think?

**MARY.** I don't see why.

**ERIC.** I asked you to pick up my tux. My *black* tux. What is this cockamamie thing?

**MARY.** It's dashing! You look like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**ERIC.** I do not look like Humphrey Bogart. I look like a waiter.

**MARY.** You look like a *head* waiter. You should be proud of that. My brother Mickey was proud of it.

**ERIC.** Your brother Mickey.

**MARY.** Yeah. He was the head waiter at Ciro's, until he got demoted for kissing a customer. (*Pronounced "SEAR-ohs."*)

**ERIC.** He didn't get fired, he got demoted for... who was the customer?

**MARY.** Bugsy Siegel.

**ERIC.** Your brother Mickey kissed Bugsy Siegel.

**MARY.** Oh, yeah. Bugsy said something that made Mickey so mad, he wanted to hit him. But you can't go around hitting Bugsy Siegel, so...

**MARY AND ERIC.** ... he kissed him.

**ERIC.** And Bugsy Siegel let your brother live.

**MARY.** Yeah. But he didn't leave Mickey a tip.

**ERIC.** Well, he was just a cheapskate.

**MARY.** He certainly was.

**ERIC.** Let's get back to the jacket.

**MARY.** Okay.

**ERIC.** Mary. Think. The head of the studio, Frank Staerkel, is giving a party for three hundred people. Why?

**MARY.** To brag about Iila Wolverton. He just stole her from Warner Brothers.

**ERIC.** And that's important to me because...?

**MARY.** Because you want to be a movie producer after ten years of writing screenplays.

**ERIC.** And I want to be a producer because...?

**MARY.** Because as a writer, you're terrible at exposition.

**ERIC.** No. That's not...

**MARY.** Yes, you are. You're really On the Nose.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**ERIC.** Ila Wolverton has script approval in her contract. If she likes my script enough to star in it, I get to produce the picture.

**MARY.** *Murder in the Frog!*

**ERIC.** Fog. *Murder in the Fog.* Not frog.

**MARY.** Fog? That doesn't make any sense. It should be frog.

**ERIC.** I have to make a good impression on her, Mary. And I can't do it in this jacket. *(Mary stands in front of him, throws her arms out.)*

**MARY.** I'll do this. All she'll see is your head. We'll tell her we're Apache dancers. *(Acting it out.)* You'll fling me across the floor! Then you'll seize me in your mighty arms and rip off my dress! She'll never look at your jacket! *(Leaps into his arms.)*

**ERIC.** I'm not going to rip off your dress.

**MARY.** *(Getting down.)* It's your loss. *(CLIFF AND RUTH LERNER enter UL, bickering. Ruth is an acerbic fashion designer. She has a martini. Cliff is an actor – good-looking, short, with glasses. On screen he plays psychos. Off screen, he is quiet and unassuming.)*

**RUTH.** Maybe I *will* go off with the parking attendant. He had wavy hair. He had blue eyes.

**CLIFF.** He had acne. He couldn't have been older than seventeen.

**RUTH.** Are you making a crack about my age?

**CLIFF.** No, snookums.

**MARY.** Hi, Ruth! Hi, Cliff!

**CLIFF, RUTH, ERIC.** *(Ad lib "Hellos." Ruth's is sullen, Cliff's is resigned.)*

**MARY.** Ruth, that's a gorgeous dress. Did you design it?

**RUTH.** Thanks. Yes. Virginia Mayo didn't want to wear it in *Park Avenue Doxy*, so I took it home.

**ERIC.** Very nice. That's your picture, isn't it, Cliff? You play a psychotic gangster again, right? And you're in love with Virginia Mayo?

**CLIFF.** Oh yes, indeedy.



## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**ERIC.** So, you're on the Hollywood diet.

**CLIFF.** What's the Hollywood diet?

**ERIC.** Holding the Mayo.

**MARY.** Are you having a good time?

**CLIFF.** Oh, yes.

**RUTH.** Just peachy.

**ERIC.** Is something wrong?

**RUTH.** What could be wrong? I'm moving out tomorrow.

**MARY.** Oh, you are not.

**RUTH.** Well, I should. I don't feel safe with Cliff anymore.

**ERIC.** Somebody swipe your machete?

**MARY.** Don't be a silly buttons! Where would they hide the tomato sauce?

**ERIC.** Machete, not spagh... anyway. What's the problem, kids?

**CLIFF.** The other night we were at Ciro's...

**MARY.** And my brother Mickey kissed Ruth. I hope you left him a big tip. He has a kid and four wives.

**CLIFF.** I... what? No...

**RUTH.** I'll tell it. We were at Ciro's and Chinese Charlie Leoni got fresh with me.

**MARY.** Charlie Leoni isn't a Chinese name. Are you sure it wasn't Roman Charlie Leoni?

**CLIFF.** Mary, he's a gangster, he's mixed up with the studio unions.

**RUTH.** They call him Chinese Charlie after Grauman's Chinese Theater, because he's starstruck.

**ERIC.** But he's a tough bird.

**MARY.** Then why don't they call him "The Owl?" Owls are tough birds. My sister Becky had an owl. He used to punch her in the nose and then look all innocent. "Hoooo?" I knew who. He'd have to get up pretty early in the morning to fool me.

**ERIC.** He wouldn't be up in the morning. Owls are nocturnal.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**MARY.** Oh, you're silly. Owls don't even go to church.

**RUTH.** Anyway: Chinese Charlie came over to our table and tried to pick me up.

**MARY.** Did he use a fireman's carry? Your butt would be up in the air, but you'd be safe from the fire.

**RUTH.** Mary, he was trying to get me to have sex with him.

**MARY.** Really? In a fireman's carry? I don't think that's in the Kama Sutra. *(Tries to work it out physically.)* If you grabbed the left elbow...

**ERIC.** So, what happened?

**CLIFF.** Nothing.

**RUTH.** I'll say! That gangster was insulting me, and Clark Gable here did nothing. Nothing!

**CLIFF.** What could I do? You can't hit somebody for talking to your wife about music.

**RUTH.** Cliff, a rusty trombone has nothing to do with music.

**CLIFF.** If you clean it off...

**RUTH.** Oh, just give up. You're good at that. *(Stalks out UL.)*

**CLIFF.** God, I'm useless.

**MARY.** You're not useless. You're a big star. You beat up Broderick Crawford. You wisecrack with Shemp Howard. You stand on a box and kiss Virginia Mayo. *(Beat. She laughs loudly.)*

**ERIC.** What's so funny?

**MARY.** *(Slapping Eric's shoulder.)* "Holding the Mayo!"

**ERIC.** You did the right thing, Cliff. If you fought Chinese Charlie, you'd end up in the hospital. Or in jail.

**MARY.** Or dead. Don't forget dead.

**CLIFF.** Mary... am I a poltroon?

**MARY.** Noooo, Bugs Bunny is a poltroon. You're almost lifelike. *(Cliff sighs and exits.)* Oh, they're both so upset. I should help them.

**ERIC.** Absolutely not!

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**MARY.** But, Eric...

**ERIC.** Let them work it out for themselves.

**MARY.** What about you? Can I help you?

**ERIC.** With what?

**MARY.** Getting Iila Wolverton to star in your picture.

**ERIC.** *No.*

**MARY.** I can help everybody. I'm the Angle of Mercy.

**ERIC.** That's "angel" of mercy.

**MARY.** This is Hollywood. Everybody has an angle. I could help you.

**ERIC.** *Don't.* The last time, you told everybody that I was going to punch Frank Staerkel in the nose. I almost got fired.

**MARY.** You have to stand up to bullies. The next time he says something nasty, look him right in the eye and snarl, "Says you!" That'll show him he can't monkey around with you!

**ERIC.** But he can monkey around with me. He pays me a lot of money.

**MARY.** Says you!

**ERIC.** Promise me that all you'll do tonight is have a good time. It's a party. Promise me.

**MARY.** *(Sulking.)* I'll have a good time. I promise.

**ERIC.** Good girl. I love you, you know. I'm going to get a drink. Do you want anything?

**MARY.** Get me a Marjorie Main.

**ERIC.** What's a Marjorie Main?

**MARY.** It's a Shirley Temple with Scotch.

**ERIC.** I'll be right back. *(Exits UL. CHINESE CHARLIE LEONI and MARILYN UZITIS enter DR. Both are migrants from Brooklyn. Marilyn is a cigarette girl at Ciro's, who wears an abbreviated red dress, fishnets and a bow in her hair. Strapped around her neck is a cigarette tray. Chinese Charlie is dressed pretty much the same as Eric – Bogart White. It looks more convincing on Chinese Charlie. He has a shoulder holster containing*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

*a .45. He is a formal, Runyonesque tough guy who speaks in the present tense, sans contractions. They look around. Mary watches them.)*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Do I not tell you to leave the cigarette tray in the car?

**MARILYN.** *(Thinks about this; then:)* Yeaaaaah.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Then why do you not do as I request?

**MARILYN.** *(Thinks about this; then:)* I dunno. As long as we're here, I thought I'd make a buck.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** We are not here to make a buck. We are here for justice.

**MARILYN.** You get so mad, Charlie! Why don't you just take things as they come? Que hurrah, hurrah.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Marilyn, do you see the paper this morning?

**MARILYN.** *The Sun?*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** No, Einstein, *the* paper. *Variety*. This new gangster picture – I see the plot outline. It is practically a documentary about my intimate dealings with the studio caterer's union.

**MARILYN.** Who are you having intimate dealings with? You said I was the only one...!

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** *Shaddap!*

**MARILYN.** Okay.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Do you know what they call me in this picture? Lester the Louse. I wish to converse with this Frank Staerkel. Huh. *Murder in the Fog*.

**MARY.** Frog! *(Chinese Charlie and Marilyn are startled. Charlie's gun is now out. He slowly puts it away.)*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Lady, I pray you, do not make surprise moves such as you do just now. It is extremely foolish.

**MARY.** Oh, that's all right. You looked much less foolish after you put the gun away. I'm Mary Ryan. Who are you?

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** My name is Charles Leoni.

**MARY.** Ooo, that's almost the same name as Chinese Charlie. You might want to change that. He's a tough fish. (*Chinese Charlie takes a step toward Mary. Marilyn ducks in front of him.*)

**MARILYN.** Hi. I'm Marilyn Uzitis. Cigars? Cigarettes? Chewing gum?

**MARY.** Oh no, thank you. Chewing gum is bad for your health.

**MARILYN.** I never knew that.

**MARY.** Oh, yeah. I heard it on *It Pays to Be Ignorant*.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Ladies, if I may interrupt... do you know this Frank Staerkel, who makes *Murder in the Fog*?

**MARY.** Frog. *Murder in the Frog*.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Frog? Do you mean to state that in this picture they say I am *French*? I will have words with this Frank Staerkel. Do you know where he is?

**MARY.** Oh, sure. This is his home. Come on, I'll help you find him.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** (*As Mary leads them out DL.*) Are there many stars here tonight? Perhaps my favorite female actress?

**MARY.** Who's that?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Virginia Mayo. (*Mary bursts out laughing.*) What is funny about Virginia Mayo?

**MARILYN.** (*Thinks about this; then.*) I dunno. (*And they are out, as Eric, juggling two drinks and a cigar, enters UL.*)

**ERIC.** Mary? They couldn't make a Marjorie Main, so I got you a Gabby Hayes. Pineapple juice, vodka, pepper and a carrot. (*Searches.*) Mary? Oh, well. (*Eric puts the drinks on the coffee table and sits, preparing to relight his cigar, as a tall, drab woman enters DR. Her flaming red hair is tied in a bun, and she sports severe-looking glasses, flat shoes and a trench coat. She carries a dress box and shoebox, and is about to fumble one or the other. This is IILA WOLVERTON, silver screen sex goddess of the forties, out of uniform. Seeing her enter, Eric stands, then goes to her.*)

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**IILA.** Hi, I'm sorry, could you give me a hand with this?

**ERIC.** Sure thing. Which one?

**IILA.** Dress box, please. Thanks. *(Eric shows her to the sofa. They sit.)* I didn't have time to change at the studio, so I just picked up the dress and dashed on over here.

**ERIC.** Working late, huh?

**IILA.** Always.

**ERIC.** Wardrobe department? *(Iila smiles, cocking her head. Is he kidding?)*

**IILA.** Sort of.

**ERIC.** You girls do a grand job. Dealing with those damned movie stars all day long.

**IILA.** Oh, they're not so bad.

**ERIC.** Come on. I mean, I'm a writer, so they don't let me on the set, but I've met a few stars. They think they burp stardust.

**IILA.** Not all of them. They don't let you on the set?

**ERIC.** I once had a chihuahua sicced on me by Cecil B. DeMille. But that'll change when I'm a producer. If Miss High and Mighty likes *Murder in the Fog*, I'm in.

**IILA.** Congratulations. So, you're here to meet Iila Wolverton?

**ERIC.** Oh, the hell with Iila Wolverton. I'd rather meet a nice, normal girl like you.

**IILA.** *(Smiling.)* Is this a pass?

**ERIC.** *(Points to the two drinks.)* Nope. My wife will be back in a minute. She's good enough for me. I'd like to be good enough for her.

**IILA.** In Hollywood? That's the most adorable thing I've ever heard. *(Stands.)* Listen, I need to change...

**ERIC.** *(Stands, starts UR.)* There's a bathroom right here...

**IILA.** No, this may take a while. I don't want to tie up the bathroom. *(Eric takes dress box and goes to the DR door. Iila follows.)*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**ERIC.** Come this way. Before you get to the kitchen, there's a sun room on the left. It's probably safe to change in there. (*Handing her the dress box, Eric opens the door for Iila.*)

**IILA.** Got it. Thanks so much! What's your name?

**ERIC.** Eric Ryan. And yours is...? (*But Iila is gone. Eric shuts the door as Mary enters UL and gets her drink.*)

**MARY.** Eric, I just met the nicest couple. Marilyn is the girl. And you'll never guess what the man's name is... (*FRANK STAERKEL enters DR, with drink. He was brought up in an orphanage – Our Lady of Perpetual Rage. He calls off stage to somebody.*)

**FRANK.** I said to move the grand piano from the music room to the ballroom! What's so hard about that? Use a little elbow grease! *Hey!* You give me another look like that and you're fired! I can too fire you! No? Well, I can sure as hell divorce you! (*Turns to Eric.*) Seven years of living here, five of them married, and she can't move a simple piano what the hell are you wearing? (*To Mary.*) Good evening, Mrs. Ryan.

**MARY.** Says you!

**FRANK.** What?

**MARY.** Doesn't Eric look dashing?

**FRANK.** Yes, like he's dashing to bring my Rolls around from the garage. What the hell, Ryan? We have ice cream. I don't need a Good Humor Man.

**MARY.** Oh, yes, you do. The humor you're in now is terrible.

**FRANK.** What was that?

**MARY.** You're a real Crabby Appleton. Try saying this when you're mad: "Day by day, in every way, never the twain shall meet."

**FRANK.** "Never the twain shall meet?"

**MARY.** It's a railroad metaphor.

**FRANK.** (*Beat.*) Right. Mrs. Ryan, could you do me a favor?

**MARY.** Oh, sure!

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** My nephew George is at the bar, and he's a big fan of your radio show. Could you talk to him for a couple of minutes, maybe give him an autograph? It'd mean a lot to him.

**MARY.** (*Heading for UL exit.*) Of course. What does he look like?

**FRANK.** Like me, only about twenty years younger.

**MARY.** Oh, I'm sure he's much better looking than that! I'll find him right away. (*Mary exits. Frank goes to his desk, opens the top drawer and puts two sets of documents on the desktop.*)

**ERIC.** Where did you get a nephew?

**FRANK.** Central Casting. Shut up. Iila Wolverton is coming tonight, and she hasn't signed her contract yet.

**ERIC.** And you gave the party anyway? You're getting soft.

**FRANK.** She waited until I sent the invitations to say she wouldn't sign unless I gave her stock for one percent of the company.

**ERIC.** So, give her the stock. The board will approve it.

**FRANK.** She doesn't want it from the board. It has to come from me, personally. I own fifty percent of the company. Caliban and Batz owns forty-nine percent and individuals own the rest.

**ERIC.** It's one percent.

**FRANK.** It's leverage. So, I have to schmooze her out of it, get her to sign the contract and keep her happy at the lot.

**ERIC.** Think you can do it? She's supposed to be pretty smart.

**FRANK.** I didn't get where I am by letting some bimbo con me. I can handle her.

**ERIC.** Yes, you're going great guns so far.

**CLIFF.** (*Entering DR.*) Kathy said you wanted to see me.

**FRANK.** I want to see both of you. You're a couple of weissenheimers. Smart asses.

**CLIFF.** Mine isn't that smart. C minus, maybe.

**ERIC.** Mine was turned down by Harvard.



## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** Do *not* be smart asses with Iila Wolverton tonight. You treat her like a star, got that? (*Iila, ready for an entrance, but still wearing glasses, pokes her head in the door. She stops, listens, and exits at the end of Frank's spiel.*) Now, Iila Wolverton is a broad. Tits like watermelons, brain like a pea. Thinks she's got the world by the tail. Fine. We're *men*. But don't let *her* know that. Treat the tart like she's equal. Take your cue from me.

**ERIC.** Okay. I'll take away her right to vote. (*The phone rings.*)

**FRANK.** Probably Pat Caliban. You two sit down and shut up. (*Eric and Cliff take seats by the fireplace as Frank answers the phone.*)

**CLIFF.** At least he didn't whack our hands with rulers.

**ERIC.** I'll bet we have to clean the erasers.

**FRANK.** I said shut up! (*Picks up phone as Ruth and Mary enter UL, with drinks, excited; bursting with news.*) Frank Staerkel. Hi, Pat, how's it going? What's the word from the board? Are they. Well, that's their prerogative, isn't it? Tell them my faith in the studio does not waver. I'll be sorry to end our relationship, but you guys do whatever you want. I still own fifty percent. I'm confident. I'm serene. I'm unflappable. (*Hangs up.*) *Son of a bitch!*

**ERIC.** I think I saw you flap there, Frank.

**RUTH.** The parking attendant says that Iila Wolverton is here! (*A look from Cliff – "the parking attendant?" Everyone sitting stands.*)

**MARY.** Mrs. Staerkel is sending Miss Wolverton in here. Mr. Staerkel, I couldn't find your nephew, so I gave my autograph to Lionel Barrymore. (*Everybody is standing; tense, excited; staring at the UL door. Iila enters DR. Her hair is coiffed, makeup is perfect. She wears a shiny, strapless gown with matching gloves and shoes. Iila Wolverton is every inch the 1940s sex star. Franklin Pangborn would pine for her. Nobody notices her. She goes to the end of the line, next to Frank. Waits a bit.*)

**IILA.** Are you waiting for somebody?

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** *(Not looking at her.)* Iila Wolverton. Shut up. *(Pause.)* Jesus. Just like a woman.

**MARY.** She's not just like a woman, she is a woman. Remember that swim suit she wore in Lake Tahoe Bingo Night?

**ALL THE MEN.** I'll say! *(Wolf whistle.)*

**RUTH.** Oh, please. "She has boobs." I have boobs. Mary has boobs.

**MARY.** No, I don't. I gave them up for Lent and forgot to get them back after Easter. *(They all stare at Mary for a moment; then stare at the door.)*

**CLIFF.** What could be keeping her?

**FRANK.** "Woman's prerogative."

**MARY.** No, they discovered a vaccine for that. No woman ever has to have a rash like that again. *Lake Tahoe Bingo Night...* that had a hit song. What was that song?

**IILA.** *(Sings.)*

"Swimming at Lake Tahoe in November,  
Everything gets pointy, I remember..."

*(Everybody turns, stunned; except for Mary, they try to remember if they said anything offensive.)*

**MARY.** No, that isn't it... *(They crowd around Iila.)*

**FRANK.** Iila! It's great to see you!

**IILA.** *(Smiles dangerously.)* I'm sure it is, Mr. Staerkel. *(As Frank introduces Iila, she is warm and friendly with everyone; it is only Frank with whom she is on guard.)*

**FRANK.** This is Mr. and Mrs. Cliff Lerner.

**RUTH.** Ruth.

**IILA.** Ruth Lerner? I loved your wardrobe designs for *I Say It's Applesauce!* You really captured the Depression.

**MARY.** Oh, no, Ruth is usually cheerful.

**RUTH.** That's very sweet of you, Miss Wolverton.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**IILA.** Hey, you're going to be seeing me in my underwear – I hope... (*A glance of "she's mine" to Frank. He nods.*) ... So, it's "Iila." Cliff Lerner! Do that speech. You know the one.

**CLIFF.** (*Shyly removing his glasses, he turns coldly, quietly maniacal.*) "Really, Mister Kirkland? I would have thought you'd like to keep your toenails. But you would have it..." (*High-pitched evil laugh.*)

**IILA.** (*Shivering delightedly.*) That's enough! That's enough! I couldn't sleep for a week after that picture. "Pittsburgh Pete!"

**CLIFF.** (*Puts glasses on.*) Oh, my gosh. Thank you.

**IILA.** Mr. Staerkel, might I have a drink?

**FRANK.** (*Hands Iila Ruth's drink.*) This is Mr. and Mrs. Eric Ryan.

**MARY.** Missus. He's Mister. It's easy to get us confused.

**ERIC.** Miss Wolverton, this is Mary.

**IILA.** I'm nuts about your radio show! How do you think up all those crazy things you say?

**MARY.** I just open up my mouth and the writers jump in. Writers are very important. Especially writers who want to be produc...

**ERIC.** Mary!

**MARY.** (*Smiles at Iila.*) I'm just enjoying myself! I promise!

**IILA.** (*To Eric; a private moment.*) You're the writer of *Murder in the Fog*. (*Eric's hand pops in front of Mary's mouth to stop her from saying "frog."*)

**ERIC.** (*As Iila sips her drink.*) And you're Iila Wolverton.

**IILA.** (*Nods. Burps. Then:*) Oh, look: stardust.

**ERIC.** Touché. (*Frank gives them a suspicious look – are they fooling around?*)

**FRANK.** Yes. Well. Shall we go to the ballroom and present Regency Hammacher's (*Pronounced "HAM-a-ker."*) newest and brightest star? I can't wait to get started! (*For the rest of the scene, when Iila talks to Frank, she uses Frankvoice – a revoltingly sweet Little Girl voice with a heavy*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

*dollop of Great Sexual Longing. To everyone else, she speaks in her normal voice.)*

**IILA.** Oh, gosh, whatever you say, Mr. Staerkel. *(Raises her hand.)* May I please visit the little girl's room first? Hmmm? I have to *tinkle*.

**FRANK.** Uh... sure. Of course. It's right there.

**IILA.** *(Exiting UR.)* How convenient! *(Stops in doorway; wriggles.)* Toodle-oo, Mr. Staerkel! *(Exits.)*

**MARY.** She's a very sweet girl, but she's going to get a chest cold.

**FRANK.** Shut up.

**ERIC.** Excuse me? You can tell *me* to shut up, but... *(Ruth shoots Cliff a "See that?!" glance.)*

**FRANK.** Then shut up. Everybody sit down. *(They do.)* I just got a phone call from Pat Caliban. Caliban and Batz has voted to sell their stock in Regency Hammacher Pictures. Those bums are divesting themselves completely.

**RUTH.** But why?

**FRANK.** Because since the war ended, we've been bleeding money, that's why. And I have you to thank for that. You and the other useless parasites on my payroll. *(To Ruth.)* That warehouse full of costumes we had to scrap from *Moon Over Titicaca*. What were you thinking?

**RUTH.** I was thinking that you weren't going to change the setting from a native village with eight hundred extras to a one-room shack with Ingrid Bergman and Huntz Hall.

**FRANK.** Right. Never blame your receding talent. *(Ruth glares at Cliff – "Say something!" He opens his mouth, tries to say a couple of words. Nothing.)*

**FRANK.** *(To Cliff.)* And you! I gave you a chance to play Shakespeare. So, what did you do? *(Psycho imitation.)* "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women – merely... playerrrrrrrrrs." *(Psychotic laugh.)* Pathetic!

**CLIFF.** But Kenny told me that's how you wanted it done.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** That's low. Blaming a poor director who is drying out at this very moment. Ryan.

**ERIC.** *(Raising his hand.)* Here, mein fuehrer.

**FRANK.** *Fifth Column Fan Dancers.* Do you have an explanation why a picture titled *Fifth Column Fan Dancers* flopped? The director? The actors? Or maybe... your lousy writing?

**ERIC.** I might suggest that marketing a smart aleck street comedy as a two-gun action picture is a miscalculation.

**FRANK.** ... Me? Are you blaming me?

**ERIC.** *(Pause. He backs down.)* No, it's probably my lousy writing.

**FRANK.** Your jobs hinge on Wolverton signing that contract. If I can't turn this problem around, I'm going to fire everybody.

**MARILYN.** *(Enters DR, looks around.)* Has anybody here seen Charl...?

**FRANK.** What are you doing in here? If my wife hired you to peddle cigars, get out in the ballroom.

**MARILYN.** You're real strong and masterful, ain't you?

**FRANK.** *(Other fish to fry, but...)* What's your name, honey?

**MARILYN.** Marilyn Uzitis. With an Emmmmmmmmmm.

**FRANK.** *(Tosses her a quarter, takes a cigar.)* Keep the change.

**MARILYN.** *(Sarcastic but sexy.)* Fifteen cents! That Cadillac is mine. *(The others are rising, itching to get out of there.)*

**FRANK.** I'll find you when I... need you.

**RUTH.** Subtle as a sledgehammer. *(Marilyn exits DR, swaying her butt as she goes.)*

**IILA.** *(Enters UR.)* I'm ever so ready, Mr. Staerkel. Tell me, am I pretty enough for you? *(Moves in close, bumping her boobs on his chest.)*

**FRANK.** Absolutely, Iila! Hell, yes.

**IILA.** *(Covering her ears.)* Naughty talk, Mr. Staerkel!

**FRANK.** I apologize.

**RUTH.** Iila, what kind of pictures did Mr. Staerkel promise you?

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** Only the best, Ruth! *Pirate Queen of Rhode Island. Cotillion Cutie. Fifth Column Fan Dancers Go to College.*

**CLIFF.** I thought Iila gets to choose.

**IILA.** That's right. I might be doing *Murder in the Fog*.

**MARY.** Frog.

**IILA.** I'm sorry?

**ERIC.** Skip it.

**IILA.** But I want to talk it over with the producer.

**MARY.** Well, you better hurry up, because Mr. Staerkel's going to fire him.

**IILA.** *(Boobs pressed against Frank.)* Oh, I'm sure Mr. Staerkel wouldn't do a meany-weeny thing like that, would you, Mr. Staerkel?

**FRANK.** If you want Ryan, you've got him. *(Sips his drink.)*

**IILA.** *(Normal voice.)* Then I'm going to do *The Florence Nightingale Story*.

**FRANK.** *(Spit take.)* Excuse me?

**IILA.** *(Frankvoice.)* *The Florence Nightingale Story*. She was a nurse.

**FRANK.** Are you crazy? I couldn't sell that in a million years.

**IILA.** *(Frankvoice; at UL door.)* But I have scrrrrrrript approval, Mr. Staerkel.

**FRANK.** *(Crosses to her.)* Never in hell. Stick to your tits and we'll be fine.

**IILA.** *(Frankvoice; wide-eyed.)* But don't you *want* me to sign your contract, Mr. Staerkel? *(Exits.)*

**MARY.** *(Laughing.)* Boy, she got you that time.

**FRANK.** *(Gives Mary a withering look, then:)* If that tramp leaves this house without signing that contract, you crumbs are out!

**MARY.** *(Crosses to him.)* You are not a gracious host, Mr. Staerkel. *(Exits UL.)*

**FRANK.** Bah! *(Exits UL.)*

**ERIC.** Oh, god. Oh, no.

**CLIFF.** What is it?

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**RUTH.** What?

**ERIC.** You didn't hear that tone? Mary just declared war on Frank Staerkel.  
*(Lights fade out.)*

### SCENE 2

*Midnight. Chinese Charlie and Marilyn are alone in the study.*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Who do I see you flirting with out there?

**MARILYN.** Charlie! Being flirty with customers is my job.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** See that you do not put in any overtime, because I will shoot anybody who puts his hands on you.

**MARILYN.** But, Chaaaaaaaarlie... don't you trust me?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Just as much as you trust me.

**MARILYN.** *(Bursts into tears.)* That ain't fair!

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** *Shaddap!*

**MARILYN.** Okay.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Now, do not cause me any more storm and stress. I wish to corner this Frank Staerkel. So far, I cannot get his attention. Parties are a great nuisance. I am going back out there. You behave yourself. For a change. *(Chinese Charlie exits UL as Mary enters DR. Marilyn yells after him.)*

**MARILYN.** *(Putting down her tray.)* That's it. I'm through. I've had it with you!

**MARY.** You have? How was it?

**MARILYN.** Oh! I'm sorry, Mrs. Ryan. I just get so mad at my boyfriend. He really breaks the devil's dishes.

**MARY.** You can go to Hell for that. But then how would you eat?

**MARILYN.** If I look at a guy, I'm a hoowah. But if he goes to bed with twins, it's "initiative." If I could afford to flatleave Charlie, I would.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**MARY.** Why don't you just get a job in movies?

**MARILYN.** It ain't that easy.

**MARY.** Sure, it is. Everybody I know is in movies. My husband is a big shot producer at Regency Hammacher. Eric Ryan.

**MARILYN.** Your husband? I seen you with him out there, right?

**MARY.** The big, strong, muscular, sexy he-man?

**MARILYN.** Oh. Maybe not.

**MARY.** With the sloping shoulders?

**MARILYN.** Yeah, yeah, yeah – I know him. He's really a producer?

**MARY.** *(Beat.)* Sure. Why not? My husband the producer!

**MARILYN.** But is it okay to ask him for a job?

**MARY.** Of course. Just ask nicely. Be friendly.

**MARILYN.** *(A hand on Mary's knee.)* How friendly? I mean, what's your limit?

**MARY.** As friendly as can be. I like it when people are friendly to Eric.

**MARILYN.** Gee, that's real open-minded of you, Mrs. Ryan. *(Marilyn grabs her tray and heads UL.)*

**MARY.** Call me Mary. You go to work on my husband right away!

**MARILYN.** In spades! *(Exits. The cigarette tray stays offstage from now on.)*

**MARY.** What a nice young lady.

**RUTH.** *(Dashes in DR, slams door behind her, chugs half her drink. Paces.)*  
Mary! He's here! He's here!

**MARY.** Gabby Hayes? I know he's here. He came with Roy Rogers. Again. Now, I don't want to spread gossip...

**RUTH.** No! Not Gabby Hayes! Chinese Charlie!

**MARY.** Ruth, sit down. You're making me dizzy.

**RUTH.** *(Almost responds automatically to that opening but thinks better of it. They sit.)* Mary, what am I going to do?



## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**MARY.** I don't get it. You're always so forceful and assertive. Why don't you take care of it yourself?

**RUTH.** I want to, but that's not the way I was brought up. A man is supposed to protect his wife, even if she's stronger, smarter and tougher than he is. My poor little baby orangutan!

**MARY.** Baby orangutan?

**RUTH.** Baby orangutans are the most adorable creatures on earth. But I don't want one around the house.

**MARY.** Then why don't you turn Cliff into a man? You can be a regular Doctor Frankincense.

**RUTH.** But how? Cliff is so delicate.

**MARY.** Let me handle that. You work on making him jealous. Get out there and find a man and flirt with him. Be a flapper!

**RUTH.** A flapper?

**MARY.** Yeah. Find a man and flap your boobs at him. I'd lend you mine, but you know... Easter.

**RUTH.** *(Stands; doubtfully.)* I guess. I'll see if I can drag Gabby Hayes away from Roy.

**MARY.** No, no, no. Where's the victory for Cliff in beating up Gabby Hayes? Go after Chinese Charlie.

**RUTH.** Absolutely not!

**MARY.** I'll talk to him. I'll get him to play along.

**RUTH.** He's disgusting!

**MARY.** Do you want to save your marriage or not?

**RUTH.** Well... yes. Of course I do.

**MARY.** Then ask Chinese Charlie for a fireman's carry. But wait until I've talked to him.

**RUTH.** *(Heading DL.)* Mary, I really don't know about this...

**MARY.** Sure, you do. What could go wrong? Scoot! *(Ruth exits DL. Iila enters UL, crosses to sofa. She has a drink.)*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**IILA.** Hi, Mrs. Ryan. Can I sit with you a minute? I need a breather. Parties are hard work.

**MARY.** Only if you call me “Herbert.”

**IILA.** Herbert?

**MARY.** No, not Herbert. I’m thinking of Zeppo Marx.

**IILA.** Can I call you Mary?

**MARY.** All right, but it’s silly to use the telephone when we can talk right now.

**IILA.** I like you. And I liked your husband right off. He’s so devoted to you. Do you think he’d ever cheat on you?

**MARY.** Oh, no. Eric would never cheat on me.

**IILA.** What about Frank Staerkel?

**MARY.** I don’t think Eric would cheat on Frank Staerkel, either.

**IILA.** Tell me about him. Is he a wolf?

**MARY.** Eric? No. And he’s not a baby orangutan, either...

**IILA.** Frank Staerkel. Is he a wolf?

**MARY.** Yeah, but not like Lon Chaney, Jr. He just likes girls a lot. He has apartments all over town, stocked with starlets who wear only opera gloves. They’re his glove nests.

**IILA.** What does his wife think about that?

**MARY.** We could ask her. I think she’s upstairs with the parking attendant. *(Phone rings. Mary goes to desk. Iila gestures, “I’m going back,” and exits UL. Mary cheerfully answers phone.)* Hello, Frank Staerkel’s residence, it’s after midnight, what do you want? Ronnie, how are you? We never see you anymore now that you’ve got a good dentist. Mr. Staerkel is busy right now. Can I take a message? *(Writing on a notepad.)* “Sorry for calling so late. Heard about Caliban and Batz. Can sell your stock first thing in the morning. Please advise.” Well, I can tell you that, Ronnie. He doesn’t want to sell at all! Noooo. His faith in the studio does not waver. He said so right at my

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

face. But, sure, I'll give him the message. Bye! (*Mary hangs up the phone and tears note from pad as Frank enters UL.*)

**FRANK.** Ah, Mrs. Ryan. Have you seen that cigarette girl? I need a... cigar. (*Mary picks up an ornate cigar box from the desk.*)

**MARY.** Ooo, these are imported, aren't they? "Corona-Corona-Corona." Three Coronas. Those are expensive. (*Hands Frank a cigar.*)

**FRANK.** (*Crushes cigar, drops it in waste basket.*) Oops.

**MARY.** (*Hands Frank a cigar.*) Here you go.

**FRANK.** Thanks. Where's the girl? (*Crushes cigar, drops it.*) Darn it.

**MARY.** (*Hands Frank a cigar.*) Here you go. What girl?

**FRANK.** Thanks. The one with the tray. (*Crushes cigar, drops it.*) Rats.

**MARY.** You mean Marilyn? Why? You already have a box. (*Offers the open box.*)

**FRANK.** (*Crushes all the cigars.*) I don't want these. I'm in the mood for something cheap.

**MARY.** (*Crosses R.*) Oh – I'll get your wife.

**FRANK.** *Nooo!* Just stay here. I'll find her myself.

**MARY.** Oh, Mr. Staerkel, there's a message for...

**FRANK.** Not now! (*As Frank exits UL, Chinese Charlie, entering DL, spots him.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Mr. Staerkel! (*Door shuts in his face.*) This is most perturbing.

**MARY.** Mr. Leoni?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Yes, Mrs. Ryan.

**MARY.** If I find Mr. Staerkel for you, would you do a favor for me?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** If I can have two minutes alone with Mr. Staerkel, I will do anything you ask. What do you have in mind?

**MARY.** I want you to let Ruth flirt with you a little. To make her husband jealous.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Is this husband such as may express physical disapproval? I do not wish to engage in a rumpus on a social occasion such as this.

**MARY.** Oh, no. He's a dear little thing.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I am your man.

**MARY.** That's awfully sweet of you, but Ruth comes first.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** What?

**MARY.** And I'd have to get my husband's permission, anyway. He's pretty strict about things like that. *(Ruth enters UL.)* Oh, Ruth, come in! Charlie Leoni, this is my friend Ruth. I'll go find Mr. Staerkel. *(Exits UL.)*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** The pleasure is mine, madame. *(Kisses Ruth's hand, which she pulls away.)* I apologize for the impudence. Mrs. Ryan states that you wish to jealousyize your tenant-for-life, to wit – your husband.

**RUTH.** Don't you remember me?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Should I?

**RUTH.** *(Really depressed now. Crosses DR.)* No. No reason. Come on, let's work on this thing.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** *(Holding door for her.)* Madam, it will be a great pleasure to work on your thing. *(As Ruth and Chinese Charlie exit DR, Iila runs in from DL, pursued by Frank. They run around some furniture, and then:)*

**IILA.** I said no, Mr. Staerkel!

**FRANK.** Frank.

**IILA.** I'm being frank. I'm not interested.

**FRANK.** Look, stop playing hard to get. You didn't get where you are on talent. No girl does.

**IILA.** *(Stops cold.)* What?

**FRANK.** Come on. You're an actress. You know you need a sugar daddy.

**IILA.** *(A mysterious meaning.)* I have a sugar daddy.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** So? I'm willing to share. Look, I'm the one with the power. I run the studio and I have fifty percent of the stock. And that's not likely to change in the next couple of hours, so make up your mind: on your back or on your knees.

**IILA.** There's another option.

**FRANK.** What's that? *(Iila flies at Frank and starts beating the living shit out of him. Frank is soon on the ground and she is kicking him. He yelps like a whipped puppy.)* Stop! Stop! I'm a man!

**IILA.** Sorry. I'll need a second opinion on that. *(Kick.)*

**FRANK.** You can't do this!

**IILA.** Wanna bet? I grew up with three brothers and I could take on two of them at a time. And here's one for Mary Ryan! You and your glove nests.

**FRANK.** Whatever she told you, it's a lie! You can believe me! *(On his feet, draws back a fist.)* I don't want to do this, but...!

**IILA.** You're going to hit this face? At the price you're paying for it?

**FRANK.** This isn't fair! You're a bully!

**IILA.** *I'm a bully?! You son of a bitch... (She gets up on the love seat to take a flying leap. Frank runs and locks himself in the bathroom, UR.*

**FRANK.** *(His pithy exit line:)* Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!

**IILA.** *(Gets off the love seat. Calms down a bit. Saunters above desk.)* You coming out of there, lover boy?

**FRANK.** *(O.S.)* You'd better hope I don't! You'd better!

**IILA.** Such a big shot. Hey, I'm looking at these papers, lover boy. I notice that the stock transfer isn't signed. Now, look. I want to sign this contract. I want to make *Murder in the Fog*. Eric seems like a sweet guy. But I want that stock and I don't want any more of your bullshit.

**FRANK.** *(O.S.)* Nice mouth. Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?

**IILA.** Just remember what I said, Errol Flynn. The only dick I want to see around here is Dick Powell. I'll be at the bar. *(Iila exits UL. Mary and Eric enter DL. They are passing through.)*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**ERIC.** ... just tell me that you're enjoying yourself.

**MARY.** Of course I am, dear.

**ERIC.** You know what I mean. Promise me that you're not messing around in other people's business.

**MARY.** What business? And anyway, why are you on your high horse when you don't even have a saddle?

**ERIC.** What are you talking about?

**MARY.** Ohhhh, you know! You're probably like that stinker Frank Staerkel. You have glove nests all over town. *(Phone rings. Mary answers.)* Hello, Ronnie! No, I told you, Ronnie. Mr. Staerkel doesn't want to sell his stock. You should wait until the price goes down, so he doesn't have to pay so much income tax. Goodbye. *(Heading DR with Eric.)* Come on, dear. I have to find Mr. Staerkel. You know, something's up with Gabby Hayes. I asked him if Roy Rogers snores, and all he said was, "Rassa fracken critcha schmoos."

**ERIC.** He says that to everybody. Don't take it personally.

**MARY.** Oh, I didn't. But I never knew Gabby Hayes was Lithuanian. *(They exit.)*

**FRANK.** *(Sneaks out of the bathroom. Crosses above desk.)* "Glove nests," eh? I've had about enough of that dizzy dame. *(Dials phone.)* Ronnie, it's Frank. Sell all my stock in the studio. Except one percent; I may need that. Because I said so, that's why! I'm *not* changing my mind, I never said to keep it. Sell it in the morning. Then after the price drops, buy back all you can. I want more than fifty percent. Just do it. *(As he hangs up, Mary enters DR with Chinese Charlie.)*

**MARY.** Ooo, look. There he is now.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Thank you, Mrs. Ryan. *(Crosses to desk as Mary exits.)* Mr. Staerkel. Do I catch you at an opportune moment?

**FRANK.** No.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** My name is Charles Leoni.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** I meant yes. (*Sinks into chair.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** (*Sits on edge of desk.*) About the picture which is in pre-production at your fine studio, *Murder in the Frog*.

**FRANK.** Fog.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Mrs. Ryan says it is frog, and this is good enough for me. I do not wish to impose upon you, Mr. Staerkel. How far along are you in the picture making process?

**FRANK.** Well, we're four weeks away from filming...

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Close it down.

**FRANK.** You can't ask me to...

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** This is not a request. Close it down. (*Beat.*) You wish to register an objection?

**FRANK.** No. I was just thinking... have you ever considered a movie career? On screen?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** On screen? Me?

**FRANK.** You could play Lester the Louse. Show all these Hollywood bums how a real tough guy acts. Make love to Ann Sheridan. Rita Hayworth. Virginia Mayo.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** What about Cliff Lerner? I see he is to play the part.

**FRANK.** (*Shrugs.*) Kill him.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** *Kill* him? Pittsburgh Pete!? I hope and trust the only way I make his acquaintance is to acquire an autograph.

**FRANK.** The part is yours if you want it. I just need one favor.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** This is quite a night for favors. What do you wish?

**FRANK.** Get rid of Mary Ryan.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** (*Stands menacingly.*) I like Mrs. Ryan.

**FRANK.** So do I. I love her to death. But if she's here, the Iila Wolverton deal won't go through, and that will kill your screen debut. Just take her home. I need her husband to stay here.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** This sounds harmless enough. (*Ruth and Cliff can be heard arguing offstage.*) May I have the use of the room? I am doing another favor for a friend.

**FRANK.** I don't think that's very...

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** (*Opens jacket, shows gun.*) May I have the use of the room? I am doing another favor for a friend.

**FRANK.** Be my guest!

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I will do that. (*Frank ducks out UL. Ruth and Cliff enter DL.*)

**CLIFF.** Ruth, will you get off my back?

**RUTH.** Why don't *you* get off your back?

**CLIFF.** Ruth, I'm almost about to be angry. Have a care. (*Pushes up his glasses. From this point, Chinese Charlie and Ruth ignore Cliff. They are Alone.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Do my eyes disbelieve me? Can this be Ruth?

**RUTH.** Charles Leoni. What a surprise!

**CLIFF.** Why are you talking to him?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I do not see you since we hunt crocodiles in Kansas City.

**RUTH.** That wasn't all we hunted in Kansas City.

**CLIFF.** Kansas City, Missouri or Kansas City, Kansas?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** But why do we yack when we may dance? Let us depart for the ballroom and find a slow dance.

**CLIFF.** It's a fast song right now. They're playing *Scrub Me, Mama, With a Boogie Beat*. (*Ruth goes to a radio on a shelf behind Frank's desk.*)

**RUTH.** Wouldn't you rather dance in here? It's much more private. (*Ruth turns on radio. It plays a song on the order of "Heartaches" by Ted Weems. Ruth and Chinese Charlie dance. Cliff has no idea how to react.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** (*After a while.*) Your dancing is as good as ever.



## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**RUTH.** *(He steps on her foot.)* Ow. So is yours. *(They continue. Cliff, with scholarly interest, goes and stands behind them.)*

**CLIFF.** *(Finally.)* May I cut in?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Do I spy a veranda just off the music room?

**CLIFF.** May I cut in?

**RUTH.** I believe you do. Did.

**CLIFF.** Cutting in now.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Shall we go there? *(They move apart. When they come back together, Cliff is squeezed in between them.)*

**RUTH.** We shall.

**CLIFF.** If I can just squeeze out here...

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** What about your husband?

**CLIFF.** *(Tightly turning to Ruth.)* That's a good question.

**RUTH.** He has no objection. Let's go. *(Ruth and Chinese Charlie spin out, releasing Cliff, and then exit Astaire/Rogersly DL. Cliff trudges sadly after them.)*

**CLIFF.** *(Finger raised; quietly.)* I object. I object. *(At door; a funny but heart-breaking sob.)* I object. *(Cliff exits DL as Iila and Eric enter DR, crossing DL.)*

**IILA.** If Staerkel keeps his word and you're producing, we have a deal.

**ERIC.** That's terrific, Iila. It's a great script, isn't it?

**IILA.** Of course, we'll have to fix that exposition. It's really on the nose. But I trust you. You're a decent guy. *(Iila kisses Eric on the cheek just as Frank pokes his head in DR. He nods viciously – he was right about them. He ducks out DR as they exit DL. Mary and Chinese Charlie enter UL.)*

**MARY.** How is it going? Is Cliff getting jealous?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I do not know. I pretend he does not exist, so I do not look at him.

**MARY.** I hope he doesn't get violent.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Feh. I see tougher guys in the movies; and this is not saying much. I must make a side trip, however, and finish your favor when I return.

**MARY.** Did they run out of pretzels? I told Kathy – that’s Mrs. Staerkel – that they were going to run out of pretzels. Even the parking attendant agreed.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I must take you home.

**MARY.** Oh, that’s silly. I don’t even know where you live.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Not my home, Mrs. Ryan, your home.

**MARY.** Oh no, you don’t. You’re a nice man, but you’re not coming home with me. The house is a mess. And we’re out of pretzels, too, so that’s not going to help you. I remember when my mother ran out of pretzels.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Your mother runs out of pretzels?

**MARY.** Yes, at my first communion. The church ran out of communion wafers, so my mother ran home and brought back all our pretzels. We kept wondering why the body of Christ was all bent and salty.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Look, Mrs. Ryan...

**MARY.** But tasty. Christ sure was tasty. But too salty. I had to drink the holy water.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Mrs. Ryan...

**MARY.** Bishop Howlett was so upset. The diocese issued a decree that any Catholic caught with Snyder’s of Hanover pretzels would be excommunicated.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Jesus...

**MARY.** Big deal. Who can eat pretzels every Sunday, even if they are the body of Christ?

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Mrs. Ryan, we are leaving now. *(Chinese Charlie scoops up Mary in a fireman’s carry and starts DR.)*

**MARY.** Oh, no! The fireman’s carry! You put me down this instant! I don’t know how to play the trombone! *(They exit DR. A moment, then Mary runs*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

*back in the room, zips halfway center, goes back and shuts the door behind her. She runs UR and hides in the bathroom. After the door slams, Chinese Charlie enters, annoyed.)*

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Mrs. Ryan, I do not have time for games. Not Monopoly, not Parcheesi the royal game of India, and not this. *(Beat.)* Come out, Mrs. Ryan. *(Beat.)* Virginia Mayo. *(Mary, offstage, laughs loudly. Chinese Charlie goes into the bathroom and re-enters, carrying Mary, who is still laughing hysterically.)*

**MARY.** Holding the Mayo! *(Mary pounds Chinese Charlie's back with hilarity. He carries her off DL. Eric enters UL, pursued by Marilyn.)*

**ERIC.** Look, young lady...

**MARILYN.** Marilyn.

**ERIC.** Marilyn. I don't know what you want me to say.

**MARILYN.** I want you to say, "You're hired."

**ERIC.** But I can't hire you.

**MARILYN.** Why not? Because I ain't got no experience?

**ERIC.** No, because I can't hire anybody. I'm just a writer.

**MARILYN.** You can't fool me. I was told you was a producer.

**ERIC.** What idiot told you that?

**MARILYN.** I can sing. *(Sings.)* "I'm jist a girl who cain't say no...!" I can dance. *(Taps around Eric.)* I can do dramatical recitations. "It looked extremely rocky for the Mudville Nine that day..." *(Eric tries to duck around her. She seizes him and spins him around.)* I'm great at love scenes! *(She kisses Eric soundly.)*

**ERIC.** Oh, my god! *(Eric feels his mouth for lipstick, then runs into the bathroom to wash it off. Marilyn runs to the desk, opens a drawer and rummages. Finds a jar of glue, takes down her dress-top and bra, unscrews the jar lid, and uses the brush to slather glue all over her bare breasts. This can be done with her back to the audience. She puts the jar away just as Eric returns.)* I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this.

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**MARILYN.** *(Throws herself at Eric and twirls him behind her back, seizes his hands and, with him behind her, clamps his hands on her breasts and holds them there until the glue dries.)* Can't you just see me doing love scenes with Walter Brennan!?

**ERIC.** Let go of me.

**MARILYN.** "Love me, you toothless old coot! It was either you or Sergeant York, and I chose you!" *(She lets go. Eric tries to remove his hands, but they are stuck.)*

**ERIC.** What the hey!

**MARILYN.** Now will you hire me?

**ERIC.** No!

**MARILYN.** You better. If my boyfriend sees us like this, he's gonna shoot you.

**ERIC.** Well, I imagine the bullet would go through you, too.

**MARILYN.** Damn. I hadn't thought of that. *(Beat.)* Uh oh.

**ERIC.** What now?

**MARILYN.** This is getting me really hot. I hadn't thought of that, either. Chinese Charlie ain't gonna be pleased.

**ERIC.** Chinese Charlie?!

**MARILYN.** *(Moaning, grinding herself against Eric and licking her lips.)* If you wanna do me right now, I'm okay with that. So is your wife.

**ERIC.** My wife?

**MARILYN.** Yeah. She's the one told me you were a producer.

**ERIC.** I'm going to kill her. If she doesn't kill me first. Get in the bathroom. *(Moves them both UR.)*

**MARILYN.** Ooooh! I ain't never done it in a bathroom before.

**ERIC.** And you aren't doing it now. We're getting this glue off. *(Eric and Marilyn go into the bathroom and shut the door. Ruth and Cliff enter DR. Cliff sits coldly on the sofa. Ruth paces. She is both contrite and annoyed at having to be contrite.)*

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**RUTH.** You could have said something. You didn't just have to stand there and take it. Stand up for yourself.

**CLIFF.** Umm hmm.

**RUTH.** Look, I'm sorry. But I just got so darn mad the other night...

**CLIFF.** Umm hmm.

**RUTH.** Stop saying, "Umm hmm." (*Cliff just stares at her.*) But say something.

**CLIFF.** Umm hmm.

**RUTH.** I had to do something. I had to try and make you behave like a man. (*Cliff stands, crosses center and solemnly drops his pants.*) What are you doing?

**CLIFF.** (*Tosses his pants to Ruth.*) You want them, you can have them.

**RUTH.** Put your pants on. Stop being ridiculous.

**CLIFF.** Apparently, I can't. Not to you. (*Dignified.*) I'm going home. (*Cliff crosses DL, Ruth follows. He keeps trying to leave, she keeps pulling him back.*)

**RUTH.** You can't leave without your pants.

**CLIFF.** It's all right. It's a warm night.

**RUTH.** Everybody out there will see you.

**CLIFF.** Tell them I'm drunk.

**RUTH.** They know you don't drink.

**CLIFF.** Tell them I'm joining the Rockettes.

**RUTH.** You'll get arrested!

**CLIFF.** They'll have to catch me first.

**RUTH.** They *will* catch you.

**CLIFF.** My legs will distract them. Rita Hayworth has nothing on me. Now let me go! (*They struggle as Iila and Frank enter UL and go to desk.*)

**FRANK.** You'll sign the contract?

**IILA.** Only if you'll sign the stock transfer. What's going on over there?

## THE ANGLE OF MERCY

**FRANK.** God knows. (*Cliff storms about the room, trying to get away from his pants. Ruth pursues.*)

**IILA.** What if we sign them simultaneously?

**FRANK.** Or we could just sign them at the same time.

**IILA.** Right. Fine. You win.

**FRANK.** I always do. (*They take up pens together, pull paperwork to them together, are about to sign together, when Mary bursts into the room DL.*)

**MARY.** I don't play the trombone! I don't play the trombone! (*She runs out DR. Iila and Frank prepare to sign again. Chinese Charlie runs in DL, stops at center, goes to Frank's desk.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** For this favor, you owe me a seven-year contract.

**FRANK.** You haven't done it yet.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** I do this job or my name is not Don Alejandro Vega.

**IILA.** It isn't. Don Alejandro Vega is Zorro's father.

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Iila Wolverton! (*Pulls out autograph book.*) Will you sign this for my kid, whom I will have someday when I settle down and grow orchids?

**MARY.** (*O.S.*) I don't play the trombone!

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** Excuse me. Duty calls. (*Dashes off DR. Iila and Frank prepare to sign. Ruth and Cliff interrupt.*)

**CLIFF.** Give me your dress.

**RUTH.** What?

**CLIFF.** It's only fair. You get the pants, I'll wear your dress.

**RUTH.** Fine. *Fine!* (*Furiously drops the dress.*) Are you happy now?

**CLIFF.** Not really. That's not a good color on me.

**RUTH.** Arrrrgghhh! (*Iila and Frank prepare to sign. Bathroom door opens. Eric and Marilyn spill out, his hands still firmly attached to her breasts. Marilyn is orgasming.*)

**MARILYN.** Oh, god ohgod ohgodohgodohgod! Ahhhhhh!!!! (*Collapses.*) Fine time to be without a cigarette.

## **THE ANGLE OF MERCY**

**ERIC.** (*Beat.*) This isn't what it looks like.

**IILA.** Really? You? (*To Frank.*) The deal is off. (*Goes to DL door; Frank blocks her.*)

**FRANK.** I'm sure there's an explanation for this.

**IILA.** There is. Eric Ryan is just another wolf. I don't want to work for wolves.

**FRANK.** You won't have to. (*Crosses center.*) Regency Hammacher will not tolerate this sort of licentious behavior. Our staff is clean! Decent! Irreproachable!

**MARILYN.** (*To Frank.*) Listen, when I'm unhooked here, do you still wanna play "Find the Cigar?" (*Chinese Charlie runs in from UL, sees Marilyn with Eric. He draws his gun and aims at Eric's head.*)

**CHINESE CHARLIE.** If you have any last words, this would be an excellent time to state them.

**FRANK.** God damn it! Who started all this!?

**MARY.** (*Runs in from DR.*) Hi, everybody! Did I miss anything? (*Blackout.*)

### **END OF ACT I**

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—  
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