

A NOVEL IN FIVE ACTS

VENUE 13

DAVID JÓN FULLER

(SAMPLE NOVEL EXCERPT)

Venue 13

© David Jón Fuller 2026

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*For my parents,
who, unlike Robert's,
have always supported my dreams.*



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ACT I: Scene 3

[In the staircase of Robert's building, between the second and third floors. From the third floor, heading down, enter RYAN, Robert's friend, with three actors, including JANE, the lead. From the second floor, enter ROBERT, racing up the stairs.]

Robert pulled up short to avoid running headlong into Ryan's cast descending the staircase. "Whoa!" he cried, more to himself than anyone else. "Sorry. I'm here. Is everyone okay? What can I do?"

He noticed that Ryan's lead, Jane, whose freckled cheeks were usually as rosy as her fiery red hair when she was laughing or arguing, looked frighteningly pale. Her eyes were sunken and dark. She reacted belatedly to Robert's sudden appearance, even though Ryan and the others stopped immediately.

Ryan, his poker-straight black hair falling just so across his light-brown brow, reached from the step above to steady her. Usually Ryan was unflappable, his energy an even keel of cool, accentuated by his impeccable taste in clothes. He was wearing a tan blazer, white collared shirt (the top four holes artfully unbuttoned), and charcoal slacks that, altogether, made him look like he'd stepped from a designer's sketchbook. But there was a dark cast to his brown eyes. Robert's heart thudded. Ryan was worried. And he was *never* worried.

"What is it?" asked Robert, still out of breath after running the entire four blocks from Regis.

Ryan manoeuvred around Jane, keeping an eye on her. "You all right to stop here for a sec?" he asked her. They stood on the landing where the staircase turned ninety degrees, between floors. The other actors paused, but Ryan ushered them on with a nod. They continued down.

[Exeunt the other actors.]

Robert tried to gauge what was wrong with Jane. She looked about ready to faint. "Can you walk? I have a cot in my office, but it's upstairs."

That was where he'd been sleeping, having decided to save money on rent by living out of the office in Venue 13. Some of the furniture now collecting dust in the second-floor storage space was from Robert's previous apartment. But he didn't like sleeping in the big, cluttered room, so he used a fold-out camp bed in his office. Which was also cluttered, but somehow felt less exposed when he was trying to sleep.

Jane winced and shook her head. "I really can't."

"Are ... you sick?" Robert asked, ready to catch her if she collapsed.

Ryan held a hand out to do the same, and he watched her as he spoke to Robert. "Jane is pretty sensitive. In tune to the energy of a place, you know? And the theatre is having a real effect."

Robert chewed his lip, trying not to let his skepticism

show. “Does she—sorry, do you have any allergies? It’s an old building, there could be—”

Jane shook her head painfully and waved him off. “It’s like a migraine, but there’s no storm coming. It really started hurting tonight.”

Robert glanced at Ryan. This still sounded like allergies to him, or a plain old migraine. Maybe someone from Kev’s show had brought something in recently? Someone wearing an obnoxious perfume? Aloud, he said, “Okay. I’m sorry you’re feeling this way, I’m sure it’s rough. Let’s look at . . . air quality. This place still has rad heat. I’ll open more windows, see if I can free up the ones painted shut. Maybe that will help?”

Her lips quirked unhappily. “Look, I just have to get outside.” To Ryan, she added, “Sorry,” as if it were part of an earlier conversation.

Ryan shifted as she clutched the old wooden banister, polished by decades of hands. “You all right to get down?” he said.

“I’ll feel better when I get outside,” she muttered, then stumped down the stairs.

[Exit JANE.]

Ryan looked on, leaning over the banister. Robert was about to follow her. Then they heard the other actors greeting her below on the second floor, and both relaxed.

Robert turned to his friend. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t know,” Ryan shrugged. “But it’s real. She’s fine

when we’re not here. It was kind of gnawing at her before, so we tried running lines at my apartment, whole cast. No problem. So I thought it was a one-off. We were getting really good energy from the whole cast at my kitchen table. Everyone wanted to rehearse again in the space here. Get back to the blocking. Especially Jane. She said, ‘Y’know, maybe I was just having a bad day.’

“We came here tonight. As soon as we walked into the building, she, like, *shuddered*. I could see it in her face. It wasn’t just a headache. It was like something was pressing in on her from all sides. And it got worse when we came up to rehearse.

“I don’t think it’s the weather changing, because it hasn’t. There’s something about *this building* that’s doing it.”

Robert’s mouth was dry. His pulse would not slow back down, even though he’d stopped running. *I can fix this*. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he asked.

Ryan grimaced. “It was never this bad until today. But now—you saw her.”

Robert nodded. He’d worked with hypochondriacs in various shows over the years, and whatever was happening with Jane, she wasn’t faking it. But he was no doctor. He fell back on something he could actually do something about. “Hey, are you sure about the allergies? I mean I always think of symptoms like sneezing, but maybe something here is triggering all this. Just between you and me—*don’t* tell Ihor—I’ve seen signs of mice. I set some traps, but I’ll put out more.” Robert chewed the inside of his cheek. He

desperately wanted to keep this in the realm of the tangible and not stray into superstition. He didn't believe in any of that crap, of course, but there were rumours that this building—like every heritage block in Winnipeg—was haunted. As if ancient plumbing, mostly-to-code electrical, and no air conditioning weren't enough!

Ryan gave him a long look. "I don't think it's allergies."

"Has she been to a doctor?" countered Robert.

"Did you even hear what I said? It's *not* allergies."

The thought gnawed at him. What if other actors, or directors, were getting sick as well? They'd have to figure out understudies, or should have already. They'd all paid their deposits, already gone toward paying Robert's utilities, Paul the technician's fees, and other mounting costs. And each company had signed the agreements with Robert for a percentage of their ticket sales.

Ryan was the first person Robert had told about his new theatre venture, his grand dream to host a roster of shows at Skeeter Fest via the bring-your-own-venue format for those who hadn't gotten a slot in an official festival venue. There were always a few, every year; Robert's dream had been to make it easy for companies to find a stage, in a *real* theatre, rather than whatever empty space they could rent at the last minute in the Exchange District, where most of the festival took place. Ryan had grasped immediately the genius of the idea, and why nobody had done it before: cost. Plenty of companies that only existed for one show or just for the countrywide theatre festival circuit might make good money

at the box office, but not enough to buy a building. Robert had made it easy for the directors organized enough to have a bit of cash on hand and who were serious about mounting a show to go the bring-your-own-venue, or BYOV, route.

And having Ryan on board gave Robert's venture more street cred in the acting community.

Robert soon had a decent roster of shows—saving a spot for himself, of course—before the festival program print deadline.

Robert wasn't just making it easier for other actors, he was also showing what you could do with a little vision. His building—slotted as Venue 13 in the official program—was a theatre fest within Skeeter Fest.

But he needed the full roster of shows to pull it off.

If Ryan cancelled, that meant no gate revenue from his production. And that meant less money to pay Ihor back.

And Ryan's show would be good. He was known for his visual flair in directing, the dynamic stage choreography that had actors clamouring to work with him, so the performers he cast were top-notch. And audiences knew it.

Aside from lost income, it would look terrible if Ryan pulled out.

Robert cast around with his hands, then clasped them so he didn't look desperate. "Is there anyone else who could, I don't know, take over for Jane, until she feels better? Until I can get a handle on this?"

Ryan stuck a hand in one pocket and leaned an elbow on the railing. "Not how I work, Rob. All or nothing." If he

smoked, this would have been the moment he took a drag. “I’m not kidding when I say she’s sensitive. Some places just affect her like this. Makes her a good actress. In tune with her surroundings. Maybe there’s something wrong with this place.”

Robert shook his head, frustrated. “I just said I’d take care of it! I’ll open some windows all night, air the place out, and scour it, and set more traps—”

“That’s not it,” Ryan interrupted, something so rare it stunned Robert. “You’ve heard the rumours about this place?”

Robert’s stomach sank. *Not Ryan, of all people!* “Don’t—”

“*Haunted,*” said Ryan.

“Come on.”

“You really think it’s *mice?*”

“This place is too old for asbestos. Probably still insulated with sawdust. Mice love that!” He couldn’t believe he was pitching rodent infestation as the upside here.

“Are you a doctor now?”

They’d known each other for years, since university. And they’d been through some crack-your-gritted-teeth stress. Abusive directors. Prima donna actors. Cheap costumes. Bad press. Little to no pay. But Ryan, like Robert, had never bought into the cheesy industry superstitions, like saying “Macbeth!” inside the theatre would curse a production unless the actor who dared utter the name of *The Scottish Play* underwent a series of rituals. (Once, they’d both been forced to march outside, in the snow, walking backwards in a

circle, repeating the problematic title, making three circuits, before their director allowed them back inside, after they’d made this exact mistake.) Ryan, like Robert, didn’t believe it was *bad* luck to say “good luck” and that you should only say “break a leg” or “Merde!” before a show.

And now he was bringing up ghost stories?

“Listen,” said Robert, “remember our first show here?”

Ryan’s posture relaxed. “I do.”

“I fell off the damn stage! That should have been the end of it, right there. But we plowed ahead. So what if it wasn’t the production of the year? *We did it.*”

Ryan nodded, smiling.

Robert pressed on. “And look at you now—at *us!* We actually know what we’re doing. You’re a great director. You have a strong cast. How long have you been working on this show?”

Ryan looked away. “Four weeks.”

Robert leaned in. “The festival opens in twelve days! You don’t want to pull out now.”

“I really *don’t,*” said Ryan, raising his voice—another sign something was rotten in the State of Denmark.

Robert stepped back, forced his shoulders to relax, and splayed his hands in a reassuring gesture. “I’m just asking for a chance. To make things right. I’ll go over the theatre with a fine-toothed comb. Clean it up. Air it out. I’m *on* it. And then—*then*—you bring Jane back, for a visit, just long enough to see if whatever’s bothering her still is. If it is, well—fine. We’ll say then your show is out.”

Ryan sighed. Robert knew him well enough to hear “It is out” in it.

“But until then—we keep your slot yours, and you don’t have to make a final decision. I mean, you guys have already worked so hard on this, right? It’s going to be great!”

Ryan met his gaze. Robert kept silent, almost able to see thoughts tumbling, Tetris-like, behind his friend’s eyes. He knew he was asking a lot of him. But the thought of losing such a high-quality show—the first, his friend’s, one sure to bring a lot of people in—tied Robert’s stomach in a noose.

After a long moment, Ryan said, “Okay.”

Robert wanted to press him further, ask for a guarantee the show would go on since Robert was promising to clean up the space, but didn’t. That would be low. Guilting him into it. The ball was in Robert’s court now. When was he going to do all this work? He was already exhausted. Would have to be tomorrow. He’d have uninterrupted time in the morning—when he *should* run his lines and get off-book before rehearsing with Evie the day after—and maybe that would be enough. He could run lines while he walked to Regis, and then after his shift. It could work.

An actor called up from the main floor to Ryan.

“Be right down!” he replied.

Just as Ryan moved to step past him, they both heard a sound from the deserted third floor. The clear *snap* of a mousetrap.

“See?” said Robert. “I’ll put more out. I’m on it.”

“I know.”

He thrust his hand out. They shook. “Thanks.”

[Exit RYAN.]

After he was gone, Robert sagged against the wall. The wooden wainscoting knuckled uncomfortably into his spine. He let out a deep breath. His heart seemed to have calmed down and he felt a wave of tiredness catch up with him. And a sense of respite. Not relief. He had his work cut out for him. But it was just work, as he liked to say. It could be done.

Better get rid of that dead mouse and reset the trap before I crash, he thought, already dreading what another night in the fold-out cot would do to his back. *Maybe living here wasn’t the most brilliant idea.*

He plodded up the stairs. At the third-floor landing, he moved a set of theatre flats leaning against the wall from where he was sure he’d heard the noise. He pulled a tissue out of his uniform pocket so he wouldn’t have to touch the little carcass before getting rid of it.

He bent down, squinted; then he cursed. The trap had snapped, all right.

But it was empty.

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