

ABSOLUTELY FIREPROOF

By

Jericho Thomas

ABSOLUTELY FIREPROOF

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ABSOLUTELY FIREPROOF

CAST: 11M, 5W (smaller cast possible with doubling)

WILL DAVIS
HARRY POWERS
MARY ELLEN O'HAGEN
BENJAMIN MARSHALL
EDDIE FOY
ANNABELLE WHITFORD
WILLIAM MCMULLEN
HERBERT CAWTHORN
WILLIAM CARLTON
NELLIE REED
LENA LOWELL
GEORGE WILLIAMS
EDWARD O'LOUGHLIN
WILLIAM SALLERS
MAYOR CARTER HARRISON
LILLIAN LOWELL
BRYAN FOY
AND OTHERS

TIME: 1903

PLACE: Chicago and the touring production of "Mr. Bluebeard"

CASTING NOTE: Any character may be played by any actor.

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OPENING

Sound and lights. Chaos. Screams of people trying to escape. Gates rattle. Hands bang on doors. Hacking coughs from smoke. An orchestra plays faint, in shambles and off-key. Suddenly, a WHOOSH of air and flame smash cuts us to:

SCENE 1

Lights up. Ben stands a little too close to a pair of imposing doors. Will and Harry, who look less nervous, but not by much. Ben adjusts the miniature model he's carrying in both hands. Will adjusts his tie, and Harry checks his watch.

BEN. One more time—who's in the room?

WILL. Harry?

HARRY. Abe Erlanger, who basically is the Syndicate. Miss Sutton and Mrs. Sutton—sisters, cousins, impossible to say.

WILL. Impossible to tell them apart until you look at their checks. And a smattering of old-money investors who like their names on things.

HARRY. Oh, and Mary Ellen, my secretary—well, our secretary—well, my secretary and Will's—

WILL. Mr. Powers, if you please.

HARRY. *(a smile.)* I'm the nervous one, Will, remember?

WILL. Today, we're all the nervous ones.

BEN. And we're pitching them... this? *(He nods at the model in his hands.)*

WILL. You're not just pitching the design. You're pitching them a legacy. A landmark,

BEN. A grand new theatre.

WILL. No. You're pitching them Benjamin Marshall.

HARRY. And a grand new theatre with their names all over it.

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BEN. I've never designed a theatre before. If they ask about the rigging loft—

WILL. Fly loft, and you answer like you invented it.

HARRY. And if you flub, I'll panic and Will will monologue us out of trouble.

BEN. Fair enough, but what do I say when they ask about— *(Mary Ellen flings open the door, drink tray in hand, slamming into Ben, who loses his grip on the model. It falls and breaks into a million, sad, pieces.)*

MARY ELLEN. *(not missing a beat.)* Gentlemen. They're ready for you. *(Ben goes to collect the pieces.)*

WILL. Leave it. There's no time. *(Ben looks at Harry, who's indecisive and no help. Ben abandons the mess and follows Harry and Will into the room, where a group of INVESTORS and ABE ERLANGER sit, drinks in hand, skeptical. Will, to the investors.)* Ancient Athens had 30,000 citizens and one theatre. Chicago has two million and thirty-five theatres. What are we still missing?

INVESTOR 1. Decent acoustics?

INVESTOR 2. Seats you don't stick to in August.

INVESTOR 3. Better fire insurance, eh, Will? *(A couple of jeers.)*

WILL. We're still missing... a crown jewel. Mr. Marshall.

BEN. Uh...right. Ladies and gentlemen, what you're looking at— *(Realizing there's no model.)*—what we're proposing is not just a theatre. It's a landmark in waiting. One thousand seven hundred seats. State of the art electric technology. Located in The Loop, more readily accessible from railway lines than any other Chicago theatre, a frontage on three thoroughfares, with many avenues for exit. Every inch designed to impress.

HARRY. And on time and under budget. If you don't let Ben here gold-plate the doorknobs. *(Scattered chuckles.)* Harry Powers, Treasurer and Co-Manager with Mr. William Davis.

ERLANGER. And what say you, Mr. Davis? What's your pitch?

INVESTOR 4. You certainly can't promise a theatre immune to fire, can you, Will? *(A few more raised eyebrows.)*

WILL. *(Ignoring it.)* Well, Mr. Erlanger, I believe we're simply overdue.

INVESTOR 5. *(Intrigued.)* Overdue?

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WILL. Chicago is a city still apologizing for catching on fire. For cattle and smoke and blood on the cobblestones. We hosted the World's Fair and built a dream in plaster—but the world left, and we went back to the stockyards. We want to be New York, Paris, maybe even Ancient Rome! But no, we're the Second City. We're still sorting the mud from the marble. This theatre—this is the turn. This is how we stop chasing and start leading.

INVESTOR 6. Nice speech, Will, but is the Syndicate even gonna produce at a house in Chicago?

INVESTOR 7. They produce everywhere else! *(Everyone turns to look at Erlanger.)*

ERLANGER. *(Standing, swirling his drink.)* Well, I'm certain it's cheaper than letting the Shuberts beat us to it. These gentlemen might just know what they're talking about. The Syndicate is on board, and we'll even give you your opener. IF it's up by the holidays.

BEN. *(Surprised.)* You have a show in mind, sir?

ERLANGER. “Mr. Bluebeard”. Spectacle, movement, color. We've got the tour company right now out east. Eddie's in it—brings the house down without even trying. Families love it. It'll fill the seats.

INVESTOR 1. Flying ballet, isn't it? My niece saw it. She said it was vulgar but dazzling.

INVESTOR 2. Well, I do like dazzling.

MARY ELLEN. If I may, Ben was also saying outside that we'll want to reinforce the fly system for a show like “Bluebeard”. Every other theatre's rigging's half the weight of what you're planning here.

HARRY. Indispensable as always, Ms. O'Hagen. *(All glance at her.)*

BEN. Remind me to hire you as construction foreman.

MARY ELLEN. I don't lift things. I just remember what gets dropped. *(Another ripple of laughter. It's going well.)*

ERLANGER. I'll talk to the tour manager. If we can align the schedule, I want that company here by Thanksgiving.

BEN. We can build it by then.

HARRY. And sell it. The show's got spectacle, comedy, family appeal.

INVESTOR 3. And the kind of thing we can support, provided no one embarrasses the city in the process. No smoke, right, Mr. Davis?

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WILL. *(Calm.)* No smoke. Just applause.

BEN. Not a whiff. It will be absolutely fireproof. *(This claim stops everyone. Did that just ruin it or clinch it? Then, Erlanger extends a gloved hand to Will.)*

ERLANGER. Gentlemen, Ms. O'Hagen, I believe we have a deal. *(The investors and Erlanger exit in a chattering clump.)*

BEN. So it begins.

HARRY. With deadlines. And Chicago winter. And ten thousand things that can go wrong.

MARY ELLEN. Then you do it right. *(She closes her notebook and starts collecting glasses.)*

WILL. She's got a point.

BEN. She means you, matchstick. Let's not make this one the third theatre you've burnt down, yeah?

HARRY. Snuff it, Ben.

WILL. No, no, Harry, he's right. But he's also nervous, because he knows it's his design this time. And if it does burn...you and me'll just build another one. I mean, nobody hires the guy who designs burning buildings. *(A tense silence.)*

BEN. We'll use Fuller.

WILL. World's Fair guy?

HARRY. And the Fuller building in New York. The flat one on 23rd.

MARY ELLEN. He builds theatres?

WILL. He's built half of Chicago.

BEN. He's why there's steel in the Opera House. Will's wife knows.

MARY ELLEN. Still standing.

WILL. She is.

MARY ELLEN. *(Embarrassed.)* I didn't mean—

WILL. *(A wink.)* I know.

BEN. Exactly. And he handles everything except the design. "General contracting", he calls it.

HARRY. Lucky for you.

BEN. Lucky for me.

HARRY. Alright, we've got investors, a design that needs a new model, and something called a general contractor. Will?

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WILL. Hey, I did the monologue when the kid dropped the model! What more do you want? Let's go shame the gods!

SCENE 2

Lights up on a cluttered backstage space. Probably Pittsburgh. Open trunks, costume racks, and rope pulleys everywhere. The smell of greasepaint, sawdust, and damp canvas lingers. CARLTON enters.

CARLTON. *(To himself.)* Every city, every stop — Nellie, you leave this blasted harness stage right for me to trip over, clean, and store. You can fly, but you can't reset your stuff? *(Nellie enters silently behind him, arms folded, watching him dig through her gear.)*

NELLIE. Isn't that what the stage manager's for?

CARLTON. *(Startled, spins.)* I can call your entrance cue late, you know. Remember Toledo? *(Re: the fly loft.)* How long were you up there?

NELLIE. Not long enough to forget St. Louis, unfortunately.

CARLTON. *(Grinning despite himself.)* Oh yeah, St. Louis. I forgot.

NELLIE. *(Playful, stepping past him to grab the harness.)* No, you didn't.

CARLTON. *(Watching her move.)* Nah, I didn't.

NELLIE. I'll clean up after myself if you promise never, ever to leave me hanging again. *(She exits, leaving him holding the harness. He watches her go. EDDIE FOY enters.)*

EDDIE. Never fall for the aerialist. Especially not "The Swan from Syracuse".

CARLTON. *(Startled again.)* Eddie, you're a married man.

EDDIE. *(Poking fun.)* Oh, but I wasn't always, Carl. Before I was a dancing nun and Mother Hubbard in this dog and pony crowd pleaser, let me tell you: no matter how they bend, no matter how flexible you think you are—

CARLTON. *(Changing the subject.)* Alright, folks, let's get packed and on the train to Cleveland— Herbie, those pants can go to costumes. Edith says she can fix the seat on the train.

(HERBIE and MCMULLEN enter.)

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HERBIE. But it got the laugh! *(He turns to exit, and we see the rip revealing his underpants. Eddie laughs.)*

CARLTON. Family show, Mr. Cawthorn! Mr. McMullen, save me from the actors, any problems?

MCMULLEN. *(Coiling a wire by the footlights.)* We tripped a fuse in the bakery number again. I need five more hands and one less city.
(ANNABELLE enters.)

ANNABELLE. Eddie!

EDDIE. Stella, my Queen of the Fairies!

CARLTON. Ms. Whitford, have you-?

ANNABELLE. Wig, wand, and wings are pressed, prepped, and packed. And it's Annabelle, has been since Schenectady. *(Carlton, flustered, heads off, still holding Nellie's harness.)* Eddie, what's the word from your wife? Are we walking into a finished theatre or a brick box with curtains?

EDDIE. Somewhere in between, it sounds. Newspaper says roof's on, stage is set, orchestra pit, everything.

ANNABELLE. And we open Thanksgiving week, ready or not.

MCMULLEN. *(Still striking.)* They say there's a real fly loft. Honest rigging. And strip lamp reflectors on each side of the proscenium. I'll still be on our stupid arc light, but—

EDDIE. They haven't fixed that yet?

MCMULLEN. Still sparking. Just gotta watch it.

ANNABELLE. Well, I'd settle for a dressing room with a door that closes and a chair that doesn't wobble.

EDDIE. This is the big time, Annabelle. New theatre, full press, opening night buzz. There'll be real critics. Clean linen. Velvet seats.

MCMULLEN. And a dog of a show. *(They laugh.)* Eddie, what was the Life magazine quote again?

EDDIE. "A cheap show for cheap people."

ANNABELLE. "And they like it!" *(More laughs. She smiles faintly with a sigh.)* New York and now the road this long. Half the time I can't tell if we're in Kansas or Kentucky. Never seen Chicago, though.

EDDIE. You'll love it. And you can meet Bryan.

ANNABELLE. Is he gonna be a nun like his old man?

EDDIE. Nah, Mac'll have him running the lights and rigging in no time.

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MCMULLEN. Save him from the actors!

CARLTON. (*O.S.*) Has ANYONE seen either the front or the end of the elephant?!

ANNABELLE. Maybe save us from Carlton first. (*A faint train whistle sounds outside. Everyone starts to move — reflexes trained from years on the road. Costumes get folded, crates get sealed.*)

SCENE 3

Chicago, Fall 1903. Inside the unfinished theatre — skeletal, echoing, half-painted. Outside, snow threatens to fall.

BEN. It's not that anyone's doing it wrong. It's just—the second floor flow made sense in the sketches. It's my own logic that's betraying me.

MARY ELLEN. So you outsmarted yourself?

BEN. Repeatedly. I tried to make the balcony traffic move like a current. Instead, I made it a tide pool. Add in the general contractor making adjustments on-site...

MARY ELLEN. And suddenly, exits are theoretical. (*Ben leans on the table, exhales.*)

BEN. It's not supposed to be this confusing. Apartment buildings weren't this confusing.

MARY ELLEN. It's a brand-new theatre built on a four-way ego collision. Confusion is the one thing running on time.

BEN. I thought I was designing flow and elegance. Instead, I've got a beautiful foyer where people have to enter the theatre house left because the city won't tear down a building.

MARY ELLEN. House right. Stage left.

BEN. What?

MARY ELLEN. House right is stage left.

BEN. Well, the lobby is perpendicular to the theatre!

MARY ELLEN. And none of the exits are labeled "exit"! Ben, you've got doors going nowhere and accordion gates across the balcony stairs, who cares about the lobby?

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BEN. You know who cares. The same wealthy South Siders I grew up with, who sign my paychecks, the same people who care about locking the balcony stairs.

MARY ELLEN. *(Realizing.)* So the riff-raff can't seat-hop. Or escape.

BEN. Hey, listen, my father told me all about The Great Fire. My childhood home isn't far from DeKoven Street. I may not be riff-raff, but I don't wish anyone harm. There will be 30 exits out of this building when it is finished.

MARY ELLEN. Then find the exits that still exist, fix the ones that don't, and get yourself out of the theatre business. *(A beat. Ben smiles faintly. Will enters with GEORGE WILLIAMS.)*

WILL. Chicago Building Commissioner George Williams, meet Ben, the man behind the arches, and Mary Ellen, the woman who keeps them standing.

MARY ELLEN. Afternoon, Mr. Williams.

GEORGE. *(Shaking hands.)* Pleasure. *(To Ben.)* Been reading about your steel bracing. Fancy.

BEN. Did it hold up under inspection or just on paper?

GEORGE. My inspector's still at it. I don't sign without a full report.

WILL. Mary Ellen, I almost forgot: let's make sure Mr. Williams and his wife have two orchestra seats for opening night. Dead center.

MARY ELLEN. Away from the riff-raff. You got it.

GEORGE. I will say, that foyer is remarkable. Wide as a ballroom.

BEN. That was the idea – Parisian elegance. Have you traveled abroad?

GEORGE. Been a little busy. *(Harry enters with EDWARD O'LOUGHLIN, trailing plaster dust and impatience. Edward opens his notebook mid-step.)*

EDWARD. Catwalks unfinished. That landing on the second-floor escape is a two-foot drop from the door to the landing. Doors all open outward. Locks are a little fancy, though.

BEN. Bascule locks. They're French.

EDWARD. They're complicated.

GEORGE. "Parisian elegance".

BEN. Precisely.

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HARRY. (*Jumping in.*) But structurally, Mr. O’Loughlin? (*Beat. Edward flips a page.*)

EDWARD. It’s... okay.

GEORGE. Okay?

EDWARD. Structurally, yeah. (*LENA LOWELL enters, leather-bound notepad in hand, fully into the room without invitation.*)

LENA. Well, I just passed two carpenters arguing about whether to nail a safety railing down or just paint it gold. I assume the Commissioner has thoughts for my readers on “structurally” and “okay”.

WILL. Ms. Lowell, this is an active worksite.

LENA. So’s every theatre in Chicago these days. Isn’t that right, George?

GEORGE. Don’t quote me into a corner, Ms. Lowell.

LENA. Too late. I read your report. Rare act of civic honesty. What’d Mayor Harrison say when you told him all 35 of his theatres are in violation of city codes? (*George is speechless.*) Hey, Mary Ellen, been a while.

MARY ELLEN. Hi, Lena. (*She turns back to O’Loughlin.*)

LENA. And you are?

EDWARD. Ed...Edward O’Loughlin.

LENA. Hiya Ed, Lena Lowell, The Chicago Eagle. You George’s inspector?

EDWARD. (*Nervous.*) Yes, ma’am.

HARRY. Mr. O’Loughlin, you’re not required—

LENA. All 35 Chicago theatres in direct code violation according to your boss, and his boss doing nothing about it. What’s your ruling on number 36 here?

EDWARD. (*Decides to answer.*) Structurally sound, ma’am. Stage bracing’s finished, no joist rot, fly tower supports clear. As a building, it’s okay.

LENA. And as a theatre? As “absolutely fireproof” as he says? (*She gestures to Ben.*) Hiya, Ben. Thanks for that headline.

BEN. Ms. Lowell.

EDWARD. You’ll have to ask the fire marshal. (*He hands his signed report to George.*) It’s okay, sir.

HARRY. Thank you, Mr. O’Loughlin.

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LENA. Thank Abe Erlanger and the Syndicate. Isn't that right, Will?

WILL. (*Ignoring her, to George:*) Mr. Williams, your Inspector has signed off as is required by law.

HARRY. (*A loophole.*) And we're not even open yet, so technically, ours is the only theatre in the city not in violation.

GEORGE. Just give me a moment to read...

BEN. (*chiming in.*) See, we're really not just passing inspection, Mr. Williams. We're setting an entirely new standard.

LENA. (*Scoffs.*) "New standard". You're lining your pockets with velvet, all of you.

GEORGE. (*Flipping through pages.*) What's it called?

HARRY. Sorry?

GEORGE. The theatre. What's it called?

HARRY. Oh.

BEN. It hasn't been named yet.

WILL. (*Smells an opening to close the deal.*) Any ideas, Mr. Williams?

GEORGE. (*a thought.*) You know, my wife's got this fur coat she wears every time we've got a fancy city event or the opera. Bought it from this Indian family at a market downtown. The man said he and his family were Iroquois Indians, and I remember thinking, "Iroquois? All the way out here?" Anyways, any event we've got that's below 40 degrees, I tell her to go "put on the Iroquois." And, until I saw that lobby today, that staircase and all that marble, that fur coat was the fanciest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

HARRY. The Iroquois. (*To Ben.*) It has a ring.

BEN. Maybe the bust of an Indian chief out front above the name. I know an incredible sculptor.

LENA. Good grief.

WILL. See you opening night at The Iroquois, Mr. Williams?

GEORGE. (*Signing the document.*) I know one thing: wife's gonna be freezing. Let's go, Ed. (*Nodding goodbyes.*) Ms. O'Hagen. Ms. Lowell. (*George and Edward exit.*)

LENA. Happy Opening, Commissioner.

HARRY. (*Smug.*) Well, Ms. Lowell, if you'll excuse us, we have some paperwork to file.

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BEN. *(Pleased with himself.)* And a theatre to finish. “The Iroquois”. Inspired, really. Exotic.

MARY ELLEN. Ben: find an exit.

HARRY. Come on, Mr. Marshall. *(He and Harry do. Lena walks to Will.)*

LENA. You know, Will, I covered the Haymarket fire. Arts beat, none of the guys wanted to write about plays, the opera, the ballet. They all wanted to write about the Cubs –well, they were the White Stockings, then, weren’t they? And they were so mad when the Arts gal got the big fire story. I was just happy nobody died. And then, I was actually on Monroe Street with my mother the day the Columbia Theatre’s roof caught fire! She had tickets to the show that night, if you can believe it. Well, lucky me got first-hand interviews while Mama watched and thanked the Lord that, again, nobody died. Well, the sports writers almost did, but you know how dramatic men are when they’re faced with the outcomes of their decisions. I like writing the arts, Will. I like writing sports. I like writing about municipal reports and corruption run amok. But you know what I really hate writing? Obituaries. You’re trying to build some kind of redemptive legacy here— I see that. Home Run, Grand Slam, I get it. Heck, I wanna walk my mother into Benny’s Parisian foyer on a cold winter evening to see that sweaty dreamboat Eddie in a nun costume. But I don’t want free tickets. I don’t want great seats behind the mayor. I just want you to stop building burning buildings. Can you do that for me, Will? Because, you know, three strikes and all that. *(Then, casually to Mary Ellen—)* Dinner next week, Mare? Catch up?

MARY ELLEN. You buying?

LENA. Always. See ya later, Slugger. *(She exits.)*

WILL. *(Seething.)* Mary Ellen, I need the Fire Marshal’s office, please. And a baseball bat.

SCENE 4

Backstage at a theater in Cleveland, after rehearsal.

EDDIE. *(on the phone.)* Hey, sweetheart. Yep, still makin’ ‘em laugh. Cleveland’s...cold. No, not Chicago, nothing’s Chicago cold. I know, but

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remember: we're having Christmas on New Year's, no matinee on the 1st, so you and the kids got me all to yo— *(pause.)* Is that Bryan? Sounds like he's crying, everything alright? He did? Put him on. Yeah, of course, put him on. *(Trying a funny Brooklyn accent.)* Hey Bry, what gives? You did? Again? Oh, buddy, I'm sorry. What was it this time? *(Beat. Listens.)* Big door, okay. Freezing cold wind, that does sound scary. *(Beat.)* Wait, say it again: only who? "Only the grave robber got bought?" Oh! "Got caught"! Well, I guess he shouldn't have been robbing those graves with the door open, right? *(Tries to chuckle.)* You're right, that wasn't a joke. You want a joke, okay. Let's see...oh! Last night during the part of the show when I wear the elephant suit? Some wise guy down front yells out, "Eddie! What's the elephant for?" And I shouted back over the orchestra, "He's my understudy!" And just kept on walking across the stage. *(Faint laughter through the phone. Eddie closes his eyes.)* Now you dream of that instead of windy doors and grave robbers and sleep tight, okay? I love you more. *(He hangs up. Looks around at the dim stage. It all feels heavier tonight.)* *(Carlton stands on stage, trying to fold over a drop that's fraying along the hem. McMullen joins him, blueprint in hand.)*

CARLTON. *(To a stagehand.)* All those "Triumph of the Fairy" fans can fold and stack neatly in their own box. They've got to make it at least through Chicago. No, don't put them in with Ms. Whitford's wand and wings; she'll bury them. *(Looks for a solution.)* That cardboard box there is fine, thanks. *(keeps folding the drop.)* And this thing's held together with spit and gauze. We hang it in a seventy-six foot loft, and one tear, it flaps like a sail.

MCMULLEN. The Iroquois loft is steel. Best ever built. Two fly galleries, full-width clearance, paint bridge, everything. Gotta hope for the best. *(Re: the blueprints.)* What we gotta worry about is whether or not these electric circuits are gonna talk to our aging equipment—

CARLTON. *(Not listening.)* And this one! We're still using the same threadbare backcloth from Philadelphia.

MCMULLEN. Ah, would you cut your bellyaching about the drops for the millionth time! Everything's getting packed for Chicago; that's all you care about. If you were turning in reports to management on things like, I

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don't know, tissue-thin drops and sparking arc lights like some of us have been asking—

CARLTON. Hey: you think they listen to me? The show isn't making money; why would they invest in it for fancy new lights or flame retardant muslin? I have sent in report after report, Mr. McMullen, and I can tell you that the shadowy figures of the Theatre Syndicate do not care. They want us on the road until they've drained every last dime from whatever audiences we can still get.

MCMULLEN. Sorry, Carlton. I'm not just tired, I'm— *(he almost says "worried.")*

CARLTON. I know.

MCMULLEN. You know, a friend of mine out in New York wrote me, said his theatre just got bought out by these three brothers. Treat everybody right, repairs, new stuff, the works. You ever heard of the Shubert Brothers?

CARLTON. No. But with any hope, we will soon. *(Noticing something.)* Ms. Whitford, please put out that cigarette while on stage. *(Annabelle, Herbie, and Nellie sit elsewhere among harnesses, notes, and broken props.)*

ANNABELLE. Alright, alright, let me get close to the end of it. *(To Herbie, dreamy.)* Read it again, Herbie. Read it again.

HERBIE. They've got thirty-six dressing rooms. Heat. Working elevator for performers, not just luggage.

ANNABELLE. Hear that, Nellie? We're finally too good to undress in a broom closet.

NELLIE. How's the fly loft?

HERBIE. *(Avoiding something.)* ...Uh...nice. Brand new.

NELLIE. Herbie... *(She pulls a harness onto her shoulder, inspecting it warily.)*

HERBIE. Seven...ty...six feet from the stage floor.

NELLIE. What?! Carlton!

ANNABELLE. Oop! Wigs, wand, and wings need to prep, press, and pack! *(She exits.)*

HERBIE. But, Nellie, the theatre has been designed so that every seat can see the proscenium ceiling, isn't that—?

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NELLIE. Carlton!

HERBIE. Fair enough. I've got tap shoes I can scuff...slap...and shuffle!
(He rushes off.)

CARLTON. Nellie, what is it?

NELLIE. I need a test run in this harness. Now.

CARLTON. Why? It's been just fine—

NELLIE. 76 FEET, Carlton. Did you know that?

CARLTON. *(He clearly did.)* You don't say.

NELLIE. I'm dropping from 76 feet in the air. So I would like a test run of, say, a tenth of that to test my harness for safety so I can either sleep or march into someone's office and demand a new one. Okay? Just a lift — not flying, just checking.

CARLTON. Nellie, we're supposed to be headed to the train in 20 minutes—

NELLIE. Carlton. Please. For me.

CARLTON. *(A sigh, then a shout to the wings.)* Harold? *(Back to McMullen.)* Mac, have you seen Harold?

MCMULLEN. Might be at one of the trucks.

CARLTON. If we haven't unloaded it, would you have him fly the aerial rig all the way in and stand by, please?

MCMULLEN. *(Looking up from the Iroquois specs.)* I can bring it in, which line is it?

CARLTON. Line 17, thanks.

MCMULLEN. You got it. *(To Nellie:)* And hey, if the rigging there's half as strong as they say, you'll be floating like an angel. *(He exits.)*

CARLTON. Herbie, Annabelle, will you drag that laundry cart over here under Nellie? *(Annabelle and Herbie reappear.)*

HERBIE. Nellie, what on earth?

ANNABELLE. Do not fall on my wigs, wand, and fairy wings!

CARLTON. Why are those in with the laundry?

ANNABELLE. I put out my ciggie, whaddya want from me?
(McMullen enters with the rigging and rope.)

MCMULLEN. They already reweighted 17, but here.

CARLTON. *(To Annabelle.)* You know what, never mind. Alright, Herbie, stack a few of those boxes, Ms. Whitford, wheel the cart behind

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them, Nellie—Ms. Reed, strap yourself in and onto the rope, and Mr. McMullen? Plant and hold. A few seconds for Ms. Reed's peace of mind, and we're off to Chicago.

MCMULLEN. You wanna help me, Carlton?

CARLTON. Oh, alright, fine. *(Carlton and McMullen anchor the rope, so Nellie can lean out into space to test the harness. Annabelle wheels the laundry cart behind the boxes Nellie is standing on. Herbie has a hand on the pile of boxes.)*

MCMULLEN. Eddie, get over here, help us out!

NELLIE. Hey! It don't take no three men to hold up a swan!

EDDIE. Is there a new curtain call I didn't know about?

HERBIE. Nellie wanted to check her harness before Chicago.

MCMULLEN. Grab on. *(Eddie does.)*

ANNABELLE. Because it's 76 feet above the stage.

EDDIE. What is?

CARLTON. Her entrance, it seems.

MCMULLEN. Alright, Nellie, are we good?

STAGEHAND. *(O.S.) FIRE! FIRE! STAGE RIGHT FIRE! (Mild chaos. The men keep holding the rope, Annabelle panics, Herbie can't decide whether to run or stay with the boxes and Nellie. Then a pop, Nellie falls into the laundry cart, the rope goes slack, and then three men fall to the floor. Herbie leans into the pile of boxes, free of Nellie's weight on them. He and boxes scatter everywhere.)*

STAGEHAND. *(Running in with a wet cardboard box.)* Somebody put their cig out in the fairy fans.

CARLTON. Ms. Whitford!

ANNABELLE. Sorry, Carl. Looked like trash.

EDDIE. Nellie, are you alright!

ALL. Nellie!/Oh, no, are you alright?/Someone get help! *(Nellie emerges from the pile of laundry, laughing.)*

NELLIE. Well, the manual release worked this time!

ANNABELLE. And held just fine before I nearly killed us all!

HERBIE. *(Laughter.)* Jeez, are we sure we're ready for The Crown Jewel of Chicago? *(More laughter.)*

EDDIE. Please. Chicago ain't ready for us! Right, Carl?

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CARLTON. (*Frazzled leader, with a small smile.*) Alright, everyone, get your wigs, transparent sackcloth backdrops, and someone steal some cardstock paper for Ms. Whitford. She has FANS to make!

NELLIE. (*With a showgirl arm flourish.*) And don't forget this flexible cart of laundry out the doors, right, Carl? (*Carlton storms away. Everyone laughs and cheers, Herbie and Annabelle cart off Nellie in the laundry cart. McMullen collapses onto Eddie's shoulder in relief. They exit.*)

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