

Bethany Summer

Age 24; **Chinese Pole,**
Tightwire, Flying Trapeze I (Angel 1)

I've been performing with the troupe for a while now, long enough to have been here for the power struggle that occurred when Ellen and Ethan joined the company. Back then, I was glad to be an acrobat rather than an aerialist. I told myself I didn't want to get in the way of Ellen's ambition, or Tina's for that matter, but that wasn't true. Really, I was afraid of the aerial work, of being so far off the ground.

It surprised everyone when the owners brought a new performer on board when Tina had finally had enough of Ellen's conniving and quit. Alice somehow weathered Ellen's snipes and plots, held the starring roles, and performed even better than Tina on the stage.

Somehow, Alice and I became firm friends. I'm not sure how it happened myself; we just clicked. When Alice asked me to train with her and Matt, I was surprised to realise that I really wanted to. My hands still shake as I climb the rigging, but after a while they were steady when they grasped the trapeze, and when I let it go... I understand now the look of bliss that spread across Alice's face as she flew.

But nobody is going to be flying, or doing any other performing, if the company goes broke. It turns out that we've been so close to the edge financially that the owners can barely pay us. We didn't know until some of our wages didn't go through one week. We desperately need our new show to succeed, but even if it does, it might not be enough. Fortunately, there are some ideas that might help.

Safety-Free

The first plan to deal with the financial problems was put forward by Ellen. It's a simple idea. The public are drawn in by the apparent danger of our acts, and the aerial acts look so dangerous, except for the fact that most aerialists use safety harnesses. Remove the harness, and the apparent risk goes up, and that gets the crowds every time.

Like so much of circus, it's a trick, of course. The danger isn't so great as it appears. Aerial work is actually easier than floor acrobatics. The timing is looser, with more room for error, once you get the feel of the swing.

It surprised everyone when Alice voiced her support for this plan. Everyone expected her to come down against it, but when the aerialists discussed it a few days after Maria and Luke's wedding, she was willing to go for it. With Ethan and Gwen firmly on Ellen's side, Clarice, Matt and Daniel had little choice but to give it a go.

As for me, I'm not sure it'll make a difference in the takings, but I was more than happy to fly free. I always thought the harness held me back anyway. Maybe Alice felt the same, and that's what brought her around. And maybe it got her killed.

Street Performance

The second idea was Luke's. Just after he got back from his honeymoon. He sat down with all the tumblers and clowns and explained it, trying to get our support for the idea. He reckons the thing to do is to concentrate more on the acts that can be done with less equipment and in smaller spaces – acrobatics, acrobalance, clowning, and the like – and expand into smaller venues and even street performance. It sounds like a good plan, Luke had even started looking into details like alternate venues, licences, blah blah blah, but really, I'm not sure I like the idea. If it goes ahead, they'll want me to put in a lot more time on the ground, and frankly, I'd rather be flying.

The Fall

I couldn't believe how rude Matt was towards Alice this morning. Yes, Alice was a little off during the rehearsal but even if he'd been perfect, he should have been more tactful. Immediately after this morning's rehearsal, he said it wasn't good enough, and told her to do another rehearsal with him this afternoon – like she didn't even have a say in the matter. Alice refused, of course, and just walked away. For a minute, I thought Matt would grab her or something, but Caitlin stopped him. I'm pretty sure the two of them left together.

With Caitlin looking after Matt, I thought somebody had better take care of Alice. Matt's a good partner, I love that he's so concerned about the people he works with, but if he had talked to me that way in front of everyone, I'd be furious. I could tell Alice was too. I directed her outside, where we could walk off some of that anger.

I was surprised at how quickly Alice calmed down, though. She called Matt a few bad names and threatened dire consequences the next time he talked to her that way, but soon she swallowed her anger and forced a smile. It was as if she was determined to be happy today rather than just being happy, but even so there was something genuine underneath.

She apologised for her temper – I said there was nothing to apologise for, and there wasn't – and then she said she wanted to go back to the hotel for a shower, and would I mind meeting her in the canteen a little later? She wanted to talk to me about something, she told me.

Well, I felt better after a shower too, though I used the one in the dressing room rather than walking back to the hotel. I went to the canteen, but Alice was a while longer than she said she would be, so I just sat with a coffee and read the newspaper. Hannah, Jeremy and Dominic were there too, at another table.

Finally, Alice turned up, looking a bit stressed again but still with that slightly-forced happy air. There was a bit of noise with a bit of coming and going at the other table – I'm pretty sure I saw Nigel and Paul there at times, as well as the other three, but I wasn't paying close attention – but when it was quiet, Alice finally told me what was really going on.

She started out by telling me how well I'd been doing with the training and that Matt had been telling her how much he enjoyed working with me. He'd been saying the same to me directly, too – I wish he'd been as encouraging towards Alice recently. Then she dropped the bombshell and told me that she'd decided to retire at the end of this show's run.

I'd been wondering whether that was what was going on. When she's in the air, Alice always seemed to love it so, the ecstatic smile that you could always see when the wind pulled back her hair. Recently she'd seemed more reluctant to climb up from the ground, though, as if she had some reason she didn't want to do it any more, something that she'd forget once in the air.

“You're ready, Beth. You're the best we've got, and I want you to take over from me when I go.” I remember it distinctly, the last words she ever said to me. She wanted me to be the show's new female lead.

And that's when Matt stomped up to the table and spat his ultimatum: if Alice wouldn't rehearse with him again he'd do the act with Caitlin tonight. Damn it, Matt knows how important it is to get along with your partner, couldn't he see how damaging this behaviour was?

Alice gritted her teeth, but just stood up, saying, “Fine, let's go then.” I saw her glance towards the other table, where the clowns were, as she led Matt out of the canteen. We didn't even exchange a goodbye.

I went back to my third cup of coffee. The yelling started just as I finished it, and we all rushed out to the stage, where we learned that Alice had fallen to her death.

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

Alice hadn't really been with the company that long – less than a year – but it feels like I'd known her forever. She knew me better than I knew myself, she gave me wings!

And now her wings have been torn away. Alice, what am I going to do without you?

Caitlin Chin

I'm not sure Caitlin really likes me and I guess I can understand that. With Alice working with me to teach me her role it's bound to make her feel like I'm trying to do her out of her role as understudy but I never meant to. I just wanted to fly!

But after what Alice said to me, should I give up my chance just to make Caitlin feel better about herself?

Daniel Higgs

Daniel is very intimidating. Part of it is his physique, but it would certainly help if he smiled more. I've encountered larger men in circus before – not many, mind – and they aren't all that daunting, that callous.

Dominic Richards

Dominic joined the troupe relatively recently, and like most new recruits, he's been started out with the clowns. I haven't had a lot to do with him, as I've been too busy training in trapeze and acrobatic acts to sit around with the clowns.

Ellen Telyanin

Alice hated Ellen. Even in private, even to me, she never told me that, but I could see it in her eyes whenever her name was mentioned. I've no doubt that Ellen hated Alice, too. Alice had everything Ellen wanted, was everything Ellen wanted to be, and did it all without Ellen's precious old-circus family.

Alice hated Ellen. Now I hate Ellen too.

Ethan Telyanin

He's taken a bit more interest in me since I started working with Alice – it's as if laying

hands on a trapeze is some sort of pass to another society to him. He's pleasant enough but he can be awfully rude to anyone who's not an aerialist.

Gwen Palmer

Gwen is one of the most recent recruits to join the company, and she has very limited performance experience, but she stepped into aerial roles right from the start. That shows that, despite the talk of how there is only so much room for aerialists in the company, there will be a place found for someone who shows enough talent.

Gwen didn't perform in our last show, though, or for part of the previous run. She had to take a break, after she was attacked by a stalker in the dressing room late one night. I imagine it will be very hard to go out there again after her talent brought her such pain.

Hannah Riordan

Hannah doesn't really seem to fit in very well. She tends to stick close to the other clowns, the people she knows best. I don't think she accepts new people easily. Her fire-twirling skills are hard to mesh with other acts, as well, though obviously she does participate in other acts as well.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy is considered an aerialist at the moment, but it's pretty obvious he wants to work his way up to aerial work... much like me, I suppose. Anyway, he's introduced trampoline routines to the troupe, an act that can be seen as a stepping stone to aerial work. He doesn't seem as elitist as his brother, but with Ellen as the dominatrix of their little family unit, I'm not sure how much he can be trusted.

John Perrett

John has been Ellen's little plaything of late. That's a real pity, because we used to be friends. He's shown a strong interest in doing aerial work recently, and I had thought that maybe I could convince him to partner with me, because I would have

needed a long-term partner if I really wanted to get a shot with flying acts. I couldn't trust him while he remains wrapped around Ellen's finger, though, and besides, Matt needs a partner now.

Lily Gardner

Lily has really started to shine since Maria joined the troupe, but she still lacks confidence. Compared to her, I was a go-getter even before Alice started training me up. I'm beginning to think that she might be becoming too reliant on Maria. Their tightwire act is lovely, but Lily's adagio with John has been suffering recently, especially since Maria went away on her honeymoon for a while.

Luke Conolly

Before Maria joined, Luke was the de facto leader of the acrobatics group. He always had the big ideas and pushed to make them happen. Maria changed the dynamic a lot, and the group became a lot more ensemble-like, except for me. Luke's fire is showing through in a different way, with this street performance idea of his, though.

Maria Conolly

Things got very clique-y amongst the acrobatic specialists when Maria joined. She seems like a lovely person, but I did get to the point where I was feeling very excluded. I suppose I can forgive her for that, now that I've had a fairly similar experience with Alice.

I mean, similar to Maria with Lily, Maria and Luke is another matter. They actually fell in love, and are married now.

Matthew Mills

As a rehearsal partner, Matt has been wonderful. He's very patient and encouraging and he's made it clear that he'd be happy to work with me permanently. It does worry me a little that he dropped Alice so soon after saying he really enjoys working with me especially since he and Alice haven't been getting along.

Nigel Telyanin

Nigel doesn't do aerial work himself, or at least not to performance quality, but he is the most experienced performer in the troupe, and no matter what the act, we always look to him for advice on staging and performance.

His advice, no, his *approval* was even more important to Alice than to anybody else. She insisted that not only did I have to achieve technical excellence, I had to bring enough emotion to the act to impress Nigel.

Ophelia Seymour

I don't really know Ophelia that well. She seems to be one of those people who gets emotionally invested in the success of a show to the point where she thinks she can tell everyone how to perform, even though she lacks the expertise herself.

Paul Morris

A few times, I've caught Paul watching me from the rigging while I was training with Matt and Alice. At first I thought that was kind of creepy, and got pretty nervous about it, but after a while, I just forgot about him. Now that I feel more confident about my trapeze work, the thought of someone stealing secret glimpses of the act is a little thrilling. It's different to performing in front of a real audience.

Paul's never been a stand-out performer, though his juggling is decent. He's dating one of the riggers now. That's his excuse for being up there in the rigging.

Susan Michaels

Susan is the new darling of the troupe, one of our newest recruits and the least experienced of anyone, but everyone is impressed with her raw talent. She's been understudying Gwen for cradle, which is an extremely demanding aerial act. While she'll only get to perform it if Gwen is unable to do so, just being able to is very impressive for someone so new to circus. I'm just glad she hasn't been training in trapeze. The last thing I need is another trapeze artist competing for roles.