

**Ophelia Seymour**Age 32; **Juggling**, *Human Ladder*

I don't exactly have what you'd call a normal circus background. The backgrounds of circus performers do rather redefine the term "normal", of course. Circus arts was just a hobby for me for years. I didn't perform except at friends' parties and the like and even then only when amongst others with the same interest. It was a fun way to keep fit, far more challenging than going to the gym, but not a career.

Instead, I was an entrepreneur. I studied business and economics at university, worked hard after graduation, made some smart investments and soon had enough capital to invest in small startups. Five years running, I made myself a partner in a new firm and by the age of 29 I was fairly well-to-do and completely burnt out.

That's when I took a six-month sabbatical. I spent a long time considering my options, and realised that I was still a long, long way off retiring, and if I wanted to get to a wealthy retirement I had to make money *and* have some fun while doing it. While I waited for some term investments to mature and give me the capital for a bigger project, I talked to some friends and made some arrangements, and finally, I started my very own circus.

Okay, it's not really just mine. I have three partners, and own 29.2% of it. None of my partners really know that much about circus performance (though they each have people placed at the management level who do, to keep an eye on things for them) and I promised that, to protect their investment, I would work closely with the troupe.

Well, it has turned out that I don't enjoy this as much as I'd hoped. It might not have been such a good idea to turn my hobby into a business, especially one this size. Now I find myself looking for other hobbies to distract me. Still, it's a damn sight better than any of my previous jobs, and really, I don't have a choice any more. All my money is now tied up in this company, and if I did leave, so would the funding.

***Financial Problems***

I may have made an unwise investment early last year. The global financial crisis was in full force, but I chose to look at it as an opportunity. Something circus people say is that circuses flourish in a recession – it's cheap entertainment, so families looking to save a buck spend their disposable income under a big top. We chose to expand, to try to grab a bigger piece of that pie.

That's when we took on Ellen, Ethan and Jeremy Telyanin, Nigel's niece and nephews. We had built our reputation on our excellent aerial act, and I believed Ellen and Ethan would enhance that. After all, they were top-notch performers, even if their family's circus had gone bust.

Yes, our gross income increased, but only a little, not enough to cover a 20% increase in performers' pays and the trickle-down costs of running a business during a recession. We still had some capital reserves, but for a while we were operating in the red. On top of that, we incurred additional costs when Tina, our star performer, quit. Her "exit interview" (to use the polite term) made it perfectly clear that she was leaving because she couldn't stand working with Ellen and Ethan any more. For a while, it looked like I was in danger of losing control of the entire company to Ellen. That's when I asked my friend Alice to join and take over where Tina left off.

Then I didn't keep a close enough eye on the bottom line, so I didn't have the reserve funds released in time to make payroll one week, and then everybody knew. I made sure everyone else was paid within a few days, soon enough that technically no contracts were violated, but the cat was out of the bag. Still, they don't know just how close to the line we are.

## ***Safety-Free***

To their credit, the performers put their heads together and tried to find ways to help. The first such scheme has been the push to do aerial acts without safety harnesses. I believe it started with Ellen, who claimed that the extra element of danger would draw in the crowds. That's an idea I've heard before, but I've seen no evidence of it actually working, and dealing with the business issues has been a nightmare. The insurance issues alone are a nightmare. However, when the aerialists agreed as a group to go ahead with that idea, there was little I could do to dissuade them without revealing my true position within the company. Looking back, perhaps I should have done that.

## ***Street Performance***

The second scheme is being pushed by Luke. Our company has always been focussed on large, extravagant shows, and he's looked into the possibility of doing smaller shows, from eight or ten performers in a small theatre all the way down to one-artist acts in city malls. I'm actually pretty impressed with the research he's done. I suspect it wouldn't be as successful as he hopes, but it should at least break even and serve to promote our bigger shows.

## ***The Fall***

One more day, just ten hours until the show starts and maybe, just maybe, we'd start pulling in enough revenue to, oh, I dunno, maybe let me draw a paycheck? That's all I was thinking when I turned up for our last rehearsal this morning. Trying to rehearse, to keep tabs on the other performers for my partners and to keep the ones who hate each other from each others' throats, and to make up for the admin staff we had to let go without letting on that I'm a partner... It was all getting to be too much. Sometimes I wonder if I should just let everyone know – okay, it'd be a bit awkward at first but frankly it's like herding cats with an invisible broom around here.

I was late to the rehearsal this morning – just a few minutes, not as late as Nigel and Alice.

Nigel had previously told me that he was going to insist on some extra rehearsal time this afternoon for Paul, Dominic, Susan, Hannah and me, because we weren't quite ready for the opening yet, but before that I had to fit in some time in the office, because with the staff cutbacks poor Liz, the only person we have on admin today, was swamped with ticketing.

I rushed my shower to get out of the dressing room before the other girls, and swung by the canteen to grab a sandwich I could eat at a desk. If I could get to a private office and close the door before anyone noticed, I could clear enough of the admin backlog to get through the opening before rehearsing again tonight. I heard Nigel's voice as I approached admin, and assumed he was talking with Liz. Just as I was about to step through the door, I realised that Ethan was there. I quickly reversed course, and I don't think Ethan noticed me.

I went to one of the side doors, and waited for Ethan to leave the office so that I could get past without being noticed. Nigel came out first, with Ethan just behind. I expected them to head the other way, to the canteen or the front entrance, but Ethan came towards the side door where I was hiding. I couldn't tell whether he intended to head past, down the corridor, or step straight out where he would find me. Actually, he did neither. He paused at the door, then doubled back the way I had expected him to go at the start.

Finally, I was able to nip across into the safety of the office. I spent almost the next hour there in a back room with the door closed, and managed to get through a fair bit of the work I needed to get done. Liz let me know she was going to lunch at one point, and shortly after I heard someone in the outer room using the printer, but I didn't want to reveal myself.

I stayed there until I heard the yelling from the auditorium. By the time I arrived there, my friend Alice had already died.

## **Other People**

### **Alice Taylor (NPC)**

Alice and I have been friends for years, drawn together by our shared interest in circus, before I made it a business concern. She did me a big favour by coming in to replace Tina, and I feel guilty about not warning her just how nasty things had gotten around here.

Alice once had such an incredible drive and passion for her performance, but in the last few months she's seemed to lose her focus.

### **Bethany Summer**

Recently, Beth's been training heavily with Alice in the aerial acts, especially trapeze. That's a big change, as she hadn't shown much interest in trapeze before Alice came on board. Alice has assured me that Beth is very good, and I'd begun to hope that I could move Beth into an aerial role and let Alice go on with her career elsewhere.

### **Caitlin Chin**

Caitlin was one of the first performers to sign on with the company, and I'll always be grateful for how much she did to build our reputation in the early days. She is patient, professional and non-nonsense. Also, she's tolerant, but I have been getting the feeling that sometimes-boyfriend Matt has been trying the limits of that tolerance recently.

### **Daniel Higgs**

Daniel's a bit of a mystery and I think he likes it that way. He's reliable, dependable and if you told me he was a marble statue brought to life I'd agree.

I've never seen him interested in anyone – male or female – and about the only person who spends time with is Caitlin; when she's not mooning about with Matt she and Daniel will be off somewhere together.

### **Dominic Richards**

He's a good lad and I'm pretty sure he's sweet on Gwen – god, it breaks my heart to see that girl with Ellen. He's a

good performer but I'd like him to have a bit more ambition. He just sits back and watches the world go past him.

### **Ellen Telyanin**

I thought I could do favours for Nigel and for the business at the same time by hiring Ellen, but while Ellen is talented, I'm not convinced she has been worth it. Tina was quite clear when he resigned that she was going because Ellen had made life hell for her here, and I suspect she's been worse with Alice.

My problem now is that our reputation was largely built on the strength of our aerial acts, and there's a good chance I'd lose Ethan too if Ellen was let go. I don't know whether I have anyone good enough to make up for that loss – especially not while replacing Alice too.

### **Ethan Telyanin**

Ethan can be a bit of a handful. He's ambitious and has a lot of drive but he can have trouble controlling his emotions. If I could keep him and get rid of Ellen I think he could turn into a real star; I'd swear that girl goads him into losing his temper.

### **Gwen Palmer**

Gwen is a lovely young performer, but she's got a lot to learn about looking after herself. She was attacked by a stalker a while back, in an incident that could have been avoided if she had just told someone about the unwanted gifts that had been arriving for weeks.

Ethan, Dominic and Daniel were the ones who stopped Gwen's attacker. The police said Ethan was lucky the stalker was declared insane, or he might have gotten sued too, for what he did to the guy.

### **Hannah Riordan**

Hannah's a funny one – she's smart but she's incredibly bad at interacting with people. I suspect that's why she likes it here, everyone's a little bit quirky – it's practically expected. She's very focused,

which is what you need in a fire artist, and I imagine she sees more than anyone realises.

### **Jeremy Telyanin**

Of the three siblings Jeremy's the best of them – oh, not performance-wise perhaps but as a person. He reminds me of a younger version of Nigel – passionate about his work and fair whack of charisma. I know he's interested in Susan and that worries me. She's way too young and I don't want her to get pressured into something she's not ready for.

### **John Perrett**

The last thing this troupe needs at the moment is yet another aerialist jockeying for roles, but John has it in his head that he needs to fly. Can't he see how much he's already achieved?

### **Lily Gardner**

Lily used to be careful, confident and dependable, but something has changed in the last few months. It shows most strongly in her interactions with John, both on and off stage. If anybody knows what is going on with her, it'll be Maria, but so far she isn't talking.

### **Luke Conolly**

Luke was one of the original performers, back when the company was first formed. He used to have quite a reputation as a ladies man, but seems to have settled down since meeting Maria. He's got a lot of ideas to try and get the troupe more work but he's awfully pushy about it.

### **Maria Conolly**

Maria and Luke had instant chemistry – when she joined us it was as if fate was working to get them to meet up. Watching Maria in their joint act is just a joy to behold.

### **Matthew Mills**

Matt seems to think he's God's gift to women. Sure, he's charming and has a hot body, but I think most women want someone a little more... stable, I guess.

Willing to commit. I can see why Caitlin is getting annoyed with him and his on-and-off attitude towards their relationship.

### **Nigel Telyanin**

Years back, I heard from some of my circus friends that about a member of the Telyanin family who had turned his back on the family show and gone rogue. I tracked him down and told him I needed his expertise. I really did. Nigel knows more about getting the most out of an act than anybody else here. He's a born showman, and gets far more respect from the others than I ever will.

Nigel has kept my secret safe ever since our first days working together. I had to tell him to convince him that I was serious about my plans.

### **Paul Morris**

If Paul had any idea that I am actually his boss, I'm sure he wouldn't have made it so easy to tell that he's unhappy being a performer. His heart isn't in it, and luckily for him my heart isn't into firing a man for losing his passion for the job. He wants to transition into being a rigger, and I say the sooner the better, but we do still need him on stage to make this show happen.

### **Susan Michaels**

When Susan auditioned to join the troupe, Nigel insisted that she was very talented. I'm very glad he recognised that, because I needed the excuse to hire her. Running my previous ventures, I saw enough down-and-out kids desperate for work, any job they can get, to have recognised that Susan was in trouble, and I didn't want to turn her away. It turned out that she is only 15 years old.

I had to tell Susan that I'm a partner in the business, partly to get her to trust me and partly so I could help her get bank accounts and such.

To her credit, Susan has worked hard since she started with us. I have no concerns about her performances. I am worried about her relationship with Jeremy, though.