

**Lily Gardner**Age 25; **Tightwire, Adagio, Human Ladder**

There's something about my past I haven't told anyone, not even Maria. It's not a secret, not really, just... personal. Private. And nobody's business, either.

I fell in love with a man when I was twenty. It happened quickly, faster than I'd ever fallen for a guy before. Six months in, he asked me to marry him. I knew it was quick but it felt thrilling, romantic. But I did insist on a long engagement.

Twenty months and twenty-two days later, we were a little over three months away from finally having the wedding, and he called it off. He told me he had been seeing someone else. He moved out of the flat we had shared for only three months, and I never saw him again. I didn't think to check the bank accounts until two days later. Under New South Wales law, a de facto relationship is not recognised unless you've been living together for two years.

It took a while for me to get back on my feet again. Part of that involved devoting myself to the career I'd once set aside, and that's how I came to this troupe.

I still question whether I moved too fast, in saying yes, or whether it would have worked out if I'd let the wedding come more quickly. I now approach life slowly, cautiously, but I know it isn't because I've figured out the answer. It's just because I'm scared.

***The Hen's Night***

I really liked John, and I thought he felt the same way about me, but things were always a bit awkward between us. I wanted to make sure there was a chance this would work before I made any overtures. But by the time the wedding started to creep closer and we were working together all the time to help prepare I really thought that he might be the one for me. Maria had been teasing me for what seemed like forever about John and being too cautious so when I asked Maria what she thought about having the hen's night and the buck's night meet up later in the evening, she said it was a great idea. Of course, then I had to deal with her ribbing me about 'having' to spend more time with John to organise it – okay, yes, I admit that did figure in my thinking but I wasn't going to *say* it!

So John and I organised to for us all to meet up at my apartment at midnight. My house-mate was conveniently out of town, so nobody was going to mind a late party, as long as we didn't get too loud. By the time the boys turned up, we were all – them and us – pretty loaded. I spent a little while talking with John before Maria pulled me out into the kitchen to show me the lingerie her sister had just given her for the wedding night – a few bits of lace, ribbon and very little else.

By the time I got back into the living room, Ellen was all over John doing what could only loosely be called dancing. I didn't want to watch, so I retreated to the kitchen again. I didn't see either John or Ellen again that night, and I really didn't want to.

Ever since then John practically drools when she's around. I really hated having him escort me during the wedding and reception, and I've tried to avoid him since.

***Street Performance***

It's no secret that the company has been going through a rough patch recently. I always thought that expanding the troupe under the recent harsh economic conditions was risky. At one point, it was looking like my misgivings might have been confirmed, when the company didn't make payroll on time. It was sorted out within days but it certainly shocked a lot of us.

When he came back from the honeymoon, Luke presented a plan to some of us. He wants to alter the way we put shows together, so that we can work in smaller venues, from small theatres and clubs right down to malls and street performance.

More work means more income, and Luke doesn't want to entirely abandon the big shows we've built our reputation on. Acrobalance is good in such venues but a tightrope isn't always possible. I know I'd wind up focussing more on adagio with John.

This afternoon Jeremy talked to me about a similar plan over lunch. He wants to take it a step further, though, to putting the company as a whole into hiatus for a while and breaking up into smaller performing troupes. He said we'd save on overheads, but I suspect our biggest savings would come from not paying performers who weren't brought into his smaller troupes.

## ***The Fall***

Maria and I had agreed to meet for an extra rehearsal this afternoon. We hadn't specified an exact time, though, just "after lunch", and Maria rushed off sooner than I was expecting this morning. By the time I was done in the shower, there was no sign of her but when I left the change room, Jeremy called out to me. He asked if I had any lunch plans, and I warily told him I didn't. He said that was good, because he wanted to talk to me about something. I figured Maria would be a while and I could risk a quick lunch with Jeremy.

Jeremy wanted to talk about his plan to break up the company into smaller troupes but once he told me about that, he was happy to chat for as long or short a time as I was. When I told him I had to get back to meet Maria, he simply asked for the bill and walked back with me.

I still beat Maria back so I decided to make sure the tightwire apparatus was ready for us to use. Jeremy headed off to the canteen. I timed things just right, because Maria showed up while I was adjusting the tension in the wire. We got to work right away, and at first we were doing pretty well. I started to think we really were ready for tonight's performance.

Then John walked into the auditorium, carrying his acrobalance apparatus. Damnit, I didn't want to be performing in front of him, or seeing him perform either. I know I started to shake, just a little. I had to go slower, more carefully.

Susan showed up shortly after John. For a while, it was just the four of us, then Matt and Alice arrived too. I was distracted again, then, by the noise of the others moving around and John shifting his equipment out from under the path of the flying trapeze. I thought about how he had told me, in confidence, that being under an aerialist at work makes him nervous.

Remembering worsened my shakes. Maria sensed it, softly spoke my name. I looked at her, and was transfixed by her gaze. It brought me back to the moment, and we held our pose, perfectly still, for longer than I thought Maria could. She's getting better, I thought she might outlast me. Then she made the next move, and we went on...

When Alice fell, the first thing I noticed was Maria's signal to stop. By the time we got down from the wire, Luke was kneeling over Alice and Susan was calling for help on her mobile. Daniel was running down the aisle, some of the others behind.

Maria led me to Matt, who had just reached the ground. She knew there were enough people looking after Alice. We didn't know then that she was already dead, and somebody had to take care of Matt. Maria sent me to find a blanket for him.

I knew I'd find a blanket or at least a towel in the dressing rooms, so that's where I went. I knelt to pull the linen basket from where we store it under a table. As I did, I saw a piece of paper dangling at the back from a corner pinned to the notice board. I shouldn't have even taken the time to look at it, but something about the image printed on it... I pulled it out, turned it upright, and squinted at the photo. It wasn't great quality, but I could make it out when I tried. It was Luke and Alice in bed... no, in my *house-mate's* bed.

I folded it up and put it in my pocket, then took a couple of big fluffy towels from the basket and went back to the auditorium. I haven't had a chance to tell Maria what I found, or even to think about whether I should.

## **Other People**

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

Alice didn't even join the company until after Luke and Maria were engaged. She bloody knew what she was doing, she had to. Are all aerialists such sluts? (No, that's not fair, there's Gwen and Caitlin. Maybe it's just the prima donnas.)

### **Bethany Summer**

Bethany is a talented artist, but before Jeremy joined the ground-tumbler group she seemed like a bit of a fifth wheel, due to the natural pairings the rest of us had formed. Maybe it's time to reassess Bethany... but she's been putting a huge amount of training with Alice and Matt into aerial performance. It may be too late.

### **Caitlin Chin**

Caitlin is much more sensible than the other aerialist women, not to mention cautious. Her partnership with Daniel has been shelved for the new show, due to there being such strong partnership acts from Alice and Matt and the Telyanin twins. It's a pity, because she and Daniel do work well together.

### **Daniel Higgs**

He has been performing with the aerialists of late, but Daniel used to be a hell of an acrobancer. I wonder if he'd be interested in some adagio in the future? He has never seemed to care much what he was doing, as long as he can do it.

### **Dominic Richards**

Dominic started with us the same time that Gwen did, and it was pretty obvious that he had feelings for her. Gwen is very vulnerable right now, it's really not a good time for her, so Dominic had better not rush her.

### **Ellen Telyanin**

Ellen has such a high opinion of herself, thinks she's God's gift to circus and that everybody else has been put on this planet

to worship her. She stole John away from me, and for what, some sort of sick joke?

### **Ethan Telyanin**

I see him watching me occasionally with this weird smirk on his face – it's a little creepy as if he knows something I don't. And he has the worst attitude to other performers – if you don't fly you're nothing more than dirt to be trod on.

Ethan is Ellen's twin brother, so it's not surprising he shares her arrogance.

### **Gwen Palmer**

Gwen is such a sweet, gentle girl. I really feel for her, what she went through must have been so frightening. She was attacked by a man, backstage after one of our shows. Daniel, Ethan and Dominic found them and stopped the man before he did any real physical harm to Gwen, but... well, I know I wouldn't be doing the kind of performance Gwen does so soon after that. I couldn't.

### **Hannah Riordan**

When I first met her, I thought Hannah was just quiet, like me. I figured we'd make some connection in time, but we never did. I appreciate quiet people, but with Hannah the silence just feels awkward.

### **Jeremy Telyanin**

I hadn't thought that Jeremy compared to his sister in cunning, but maybe he does. He certainly has more ambition than I had thought. His proposal amounts to disbanding the company and reforming under someone else's control. His, I would guess. But is that a bad thing? A lot depends on how much I trust him.

### **John Perrett**

Over time, working with him for so long, John became more to me than just a performance partner and my feelings were definitely starting to creep past 'just friends'.

I thought he felt the same way, or at least that he might in time. But then Ellen decided she wanted to play her head-games with John, and now he practically drools every time she enters the room, and he doesn't even care what I feel. They aren't even having a relationship, and John still thinks of nothing but her.

### **Luke Conolly**

I thought that Luke was a good man and that Maria was really lucky to have found him, but with this photo that I've found... I just don't know what to think of him now. There were stories, back before Maria and Luke got together, about Luke and women. It was okay then, he could sleep with anyone he liked, and it didn't bother me, but now he's married to Maria. I guess men never really change that much.

### **Maria Conolly**

Maria has been my best friend ever since she joined the company. We just kind of hit it off right from the start, her and me and Luke. Back when she first joined, nobody in the troupe really had much in the way of wire- and rope-walking skills. Maria and I essentially put all the work into developing those acts, and now we are pretty good at several forms – slack and tight, lines and wires.

We got to be such good friends that I was Maria's Maid of Honour. So now the question is, what does a Maid of Honour do for her friend in this situation?

### **Matthew Mills**

Matthew is such an incredible flirt. I'd say he's been trying to get into my pants for years, but he treats every woman the same way, and I've never seen him push it too far. I can't say I don't find it flattering, either, I've always found it a bit of a confidence booster. He is pretty attractive, too.

### **Nigel Telyanin**

I can barely believe that Nigel is related to Ellen and Ethan. He has been a tremendous help to me – to everyone, really – since I

joined the company. He's not that great an acrobat himself, but he knows how to make characters come alive during our performances. Give him a character part for a clown, and there's no-one better. Give him a character part for an acrobat, a dancer or an aerialist, and an artist to perform it, and he'll make you think there's no-one better than the person he coaches.

### **Ophelia Seymour**

Ophelia is a bit of a busy-body. We've never been close but she keeps trying to get me to "sit down and have a talk with her". I know her type though; give her a chance and she'll spread gossip.

### **Paul Morris**

Paul has been with the company for quite a while, and has become a good friend of Nigel's. I've done a few acts with him in the past, but not many as he usually can't be bothered extending himself physically. For this show, though, we needed to develop an act to replace Luke and Maria's risley act, just in case they aren't able to perform on a particular occasion, because nobody is going to be able to understudy either of them for risley. And that's how I wound up understudy for a human ladder act with Paul, Jeremy, Dominic and John.

Well, one day Paul told me I was doing really badly in the human ladder act. Who is he to judge me? Paul's a crap acrobat, and I'm the one whose risking life and limb at the top a stack of acrobats like him.

### **Susan Michaels**

Susan seems to get along pretty well with most of the other performers, but I can't help but get the feeling that she doesn't like me. She doesn't seem to want to talk to me, and even though I went to some lengths to make it clear that she should be there, she didn't show up to Maria's hen's night. It might have more to do with Maria than me, but... oh, I just don't know.