

Matthew Mills**Age 30; Flying Trapeze I (Angel 2)**

I miss Tina. I really loved working with her. You know what her favourite song was? Bette Midler, *Wind Beneath My Wings*. I bet nobody else remembers that, but she used to tell me that I was the wind beneath her wings. She was the star, but I was the one who allowed her to fly.

I love being a catcher. I do swinging trapeze as well as flying, but I prefer the partner work. I love seeing my partner's face, the joy that I see when I work with someone like Tina or Beth. The rush of power that comes with knowing that her life and body depends on me. The feel of her skin in my hands.

It spills over into life beyond the stage, too. Socially, I love interacting with women. Talking, touching, flirting, it's always women who make me feel strong. I almost wish I had been at the theatre the night Gwen was attacked, just to be the one to save her.

But there's a time when I want someone else to be the strong one, someone to hold me and say it's all going to be okay. I've tried dating women in the past but they could never provide the security I needed. But then I met Daniel and suddenly everything fell into place – Dan made me feel safe, secure. All of a sudden I could be the person I wanted and not the one everyone kept demanding me to be.

That's why although I've been seeing Daniel for the last year or so I still prefer it to be a private thing. I want people to still feel they can rely on me to be there for them so as far as the world is concerned, I'm straight. But when we are alone, I love him dearly.

Caitlin has been helping us keep our relationship a secret. Caitlin is Daniel's closest friend, other than me, and sometimes Caitlin and I pretend to go out on dates. We always split up once we are alone, and I meet up with Daniel instead.

Tina knew, too. The four of us were so good together, one of the best aerial acts in Australia. Ellen ruined that for us, when she made life hell for Tina until she finally quit.

Safety-Free

A while back, it came out that the circus was in financial trouble. The owners and managers hadn't said anything, not until the clowns' pay didn't come through one payday.

It was Ellen who put forward a possible solution, something that we aerialists could do to help. She suggested working without safety harnesses, to increase the apparent danger. The crowds love that sort of thing.

If I'd still been working with Tina, I'd have jumped at the chance to work safety-free. I'd have been confident in her abilities, and harnesses detract from my own rush. Alice, though, was already showing some signs of distraction. I didn't like the idea that I could actually be responsible for an injury if we missed a catch. Caitlin would be understudy for Alice's role, and I knew she'd be uncomfortable with it, ever-practical as she is.

But if I could work safety-free with Beth, that would be fantastic. Beth has the same love of flying that Alice and Tina had, and working without a harness seems to make her more confident, not less.

I didn't actually break ranks with Caitlin and Daniel over the issue, but when Alice sided with Ellen, Ethan and Gwen on the idea and voted us down, I'm not sure I was displeased with the outcome. Not at the time. Since then, though, I'd been getting more and more worried about working with Alice.

The Fall

We weren't even supposed to be rehearsing the flying act this afternoon, but I was worried. I wasn't sure we were ready, and yesterday when we almost missed a catch... It scared the crap out of me, feeling her hand sliding through mine, and when she was massaging her hand afterwards, I knew I must have hurt her when I squeezed to make sure she didn't fall.

So I wanted to get in some extra practice this afternoon, to make sure we were ready for the opening performance. With the extra stress, all the attention, I thought that's when things would go wrong, if they ever did. And if we practiced, and knew we weren't ready, well, we could try it with the safeties again. It doesn't wow the crowds so much, and the drag would throw our timing out after practicing without for so long, but it would still have been safer. Damn it, why didn't Alice understand that it was her I was worried about?

I talked to Alice about the extra rehearsal right after morning rehearsal. I knew some of the others could hear us, but I didn't really care. Alice didn't want to do it, she said she'd rather get some rest before tonight's show. She wouldn't listen to me, walked off in a huff. Caitlin dragged me off before I could shake some sense into her.

Daniel met us in the hotel – I have no doubt he had a hand in Caitlin intervening. The two of them are so close that if I didn't know better I'd be worried they had something going on. I admit I blew off steam by having a good old yell – Dan just sat there waiting for me to get it all out. Even after all this time I can't understand how he can keep cool all the time. Well, maybe not all the time – he got pretty warm once I'd stopped screaming.

After an hour or so we headed back to the theatre separately figuring we'd find some lunch with some of the others. We try not to spend too much time alone during the day, in case somebody notices. When I got to the lunch room, Alice was there with Beth, and most of the clowns were sharing a table. I guess I kind of blew my stack then, because I walked up and told Alice that if she didn't practice with me again that afternoon, I'd do the act with Caitlin instead. Alice gave me such a nasty look, I thought we were gonna have a full-on shouting match, but then she said, "Fine, let's go then." She glanced over at the clowns, then headed out the door. I was surprised that she gave in so easily after this morning but I'll admit I was more than a little relieved. I barely had a chance to nod at Dan as he came into the lunch room.

When we got to the rehearsal space, Susan and John were already training on the ground and Maria and Lily were on the tightwire, but the aerial rigs were free, so we spent about ten minutes warming up before we headed up the ladders.

I pushed off first, three complete swings to give Alice the timing, then she jumped. It was a simple trick, one flip and catch – always start easy, to get into the rhythm – but something went wrong. She came out of the flip too low, I could see she was too low, and I stretched out as much as I could – I loosened my leg hold so much I'm not sure I could have held on if I had caught her. It wasn't enough. I missed her fingers by an inch, maybe two, and she screamed as she fell.

By the time I got down to the ground, she was dead. John was on the floor beside her, blood smeared on his hands and knees, and Lily and Maria pulled me away.

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

Alice was a flier too. She had that same passion, and I got that rush when catching her... but she let things distract her. The last few weeks, her mind hasn't been on the act. Get her in the air, and all her troubles would fall away for just an instant, but getting her to that point has been getting harder and harder. It's too late to start concentrating once you've already released the bar.

Bethany Summer

Bethany has been training in trapeze with me and Alice. At first she was obviously frightened, but as the fear slipped away she grew in confidence and her skill started to shine through. Her strength and timing are very good, better even than Alice or Caitlin's, and I just love working with her.

Beth surprised some of the others when she voiced her preference for Ellen's safety-free plan, but it wasn't a shock to me. She no longer has any fear at all of the height or the fall. At least, she didn't. Alice's death may give many of us cause to reconsider.

Caitlin Chin

Caitlin is Daniel's best friend. If he were straight, I'm sure the two of them would be together. I mean, they are a perfect match – both so quiet, gentle and patient.

It's great having such a good friend as Caitlin. She's done so much for Daniel and me, helping to conceal our relationship, even going out with me on "dates" so that everyone else thinks I'm straight. Back before I met Daniel and Caitlin, I'd go on dates just to keep up appearances, and it really never worked out very well. It's so much easier to just pretend with Caitlin and ditch her for Daniel when we get out of sight.

Daniel Higgs

Daniel's the strongest man I've ever known, and the way he moves and acts, you'd almost think he was carved from stone. There's nobody so solid and

dependable, either. He's also very self-assured, which allows him to be open about his sexuality. He doesn't emphasise it, though, and he respects my decision not to reveal our relationship.

You wouldn't pick us as a couple, though. He's so quiet, so reserved. They say that opposites attract, and I guess that's true, at least for us. I'm amazed that the relationship has worked out so well. I guess this is what true love feels like.

Dominic Richards

Dominic is one of the newest recruits to our company, and as such mostly does clowning, stilt-walking and juggling. He and Gwen are friends from before they joined us, and it's fairly obvious that he wanted there to be more than that between them. Before the attack on Gwen, he had mentioned her boyfriend in New South Wales, which seemed to be what stopped him making a move.

Ellen Telyanin

Ellen is ambitious, stuck-up and cunning. She thinks that just because she came from an old circus family that makes her something special. She's a very good aerialist, I'll give her that, but no matter what she thinks, she's never been as good as Tina, or even Alice on her good days.

Ellen is also a terrible flirt. It used to annoy me, how slutty she came across, but now she's dating Gwen, and I realised that the flirting with men was just show. I don't think John knows that. Ellen has been leading him on for quite a while. On the other hand, John might just be effeminate enough to get it on with a lesbian.

Ethan Telyanin

Ethan is Ellen's twin brother. He's every bit as elitist as his sister, but less conniving about it. He's definitely got the potential to be a brutal thug, and I'm not sure whether he hasn't become that because he's hiding a brain under his bad temper, or due to his sister's influence.

Gwen Palmer

Gwen is a lovely, gentle girl, who has had to grow up way too fast. Life with a touring show isn't easy for anyone so young, and then Gwen was attacked by a maniac who had stalked her for weeks, maybe even months. A more mature woman might have known how to deal with it better, at least known to tell someone.

Now, interacting with men distresses Gwen. The only exceptions are Daniel, Dominic and Ethan. The true irony is that she'd be completely safe with me, but I can't tell her why to convince her; while Ethan could be downright dangerous to her, and Dominic... well, I've seen that kicked puppy look before, and he's had it even since Gwen hooked up with Ellen. At least I know Daniel will look out for Gwen.

Hannah Riordan

Hannah is really quite an odd girl. I like to flirt with her as much as with any woman, but with her the kick is the look of confusion I always get in response. She's such a nerd that she just doesn't get it.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy seems nicer than his older brother and sister, but I still have to wonder whether he harbours the same ambitions. Some performers regard the trampoline as a stepping stone from floor tumbling to aerial acts. Two Telyanin aerialists are already quite enough to handle.

John Perrett

It's funny, everyone thinks of Daniel as such a manly guy, and he's gay, while John is about as effeminate as guys come, and he's straight. John's so straight, in fact, that he has been practically drooling over Ellen ever since Luke and Maria's wedding, where he was the Best Man.

Lily Gardner

Lily is a lovely woman, fun to be around and fairly outgoing. She throws a great party, too – as Maid of Honour, I understand she came up with the idea of combining the Luke's buck's night with

Maria's hen's night late in the evening, and that was great fun.

Luke Conolly

Luke used to be a bit of a player, but he recently married Maria, who is often his performance partner too. Even during the engagement, he could be pretty flirty, but I know better than anyone that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Being married has calmed him down a lot, though.

Maria Conolly

I have to be a little careful with Maria these days. I'm not sure that she takes too kindly to my flirting now that she's married.

Nigel Telyanin

Nigel is proof that the old families still can produce top-calibre performers. He's an expert clown, and his knowledge of physical comedy and physical drama is a big help to all of us, even the aerialists. It's not enough to just do tricks, we have to convey an emotion or tell a story with them, and Nigel helps us do that.

Ophelia Seymour

Ophelia was one of the very first performers hired by the company, but unlike many of the other performers, she's never moved up the ranks. Clowning is usually a stepping stone to other acts. Nigel stays a clown because he's too good a clown to be moved; Paul stays a clown because he's too bad at anything else to move; but why is Ophelia still concentrating on clowning after all this time?

Paul Morris

Paul has been dating one of the riggers, Cecelia, and it has sparked an interest in rigging.

Susan Michaels

Susan is the third of the new recruits, having started with us at the same time as Gwen and Daniel. I hear she's pretty good, but I haven't had much opportunity to work with her myself.