

Gwen Palmer

Age 19; **Tissu, Cradle (Flier)**, *Dance Trapeze*,
Flying Trapeze II (Flier)

I started my circus training through classes with Circus Oz. My boyfriend Brian and I were dancers in high school. We were really very good dancers, and wanted to stretch ourselves further, so we started circus classes too. Circus is even more physical than dance, though it let us use a lot of what we had already learned as well.

But Circus Oz has a much smaller performance group than their classes, so only the very best of those who learn circus arts there ever get to perform professionally with Oz. Neither Brian nor I was good enough to secure a place there, so if we wanted to make a career out of circus, we had to look for work elsewhere. We used our partnership acts to audition for a number of groups, but they didn't really impress anyone. I guess we had just grown apart a bit during our training. We both found we had more success when we auditioned our solo acts.

It was my tissu act that impressed the people from this company. I do trapeze, expressive dance and tumbling as well, but I do agree that tissu is my best act. There's so much opportunity for expression in tissu, and I love the feel of the silks around my body. I don't even think of it as a performance, I just let myself feel, and let what I feel come out in my movement. It's about sensation. Sensuality, if you like.

Brian got a job with a different group, in Sydney. We talked about a long-distance relationship, but soon realised that it just wasn't what we wanted. We broke up instead. I was pretty sad for a while, but at least I had my good friend Dominic to help me through it. He was in some of my classes at Circus Oz, and he had become very good friend to Brian and me.

The Stalker

It was a couple of months after I started performing with the company that it started. There was somebody in the audience with a camera. I got dazzled by the flash during my tissu act. Fortunately I could literally perform it with my eyes closed, and nobody in the audience even noticed what had happened. Then the same happened the next night. I heard later that an usher had talked to the owner of the camera that night. Nobody is supposed to take photos during a performance, especially using a flash.

But he didn't stop. There wasn't always a flash, but I often heard the shutter-click during my act. Within a few weeks, I started receiving gifts – flowers, chocolates, little trinkets. Sometimes they had home-made cards showing photos of me. I hated having this creep out there, but I didn't know what to do about it. It just made me feel dirty somehow.

I know some of the others knew about the gifts, and that there was a rumour that they were from Brian. I hadn't really talked much about Brian and our breakup; it hadn't seemed like anybody's business. It was just easier to let people believe the rumour, and try to forget that it was happening at all.

Until the night that the lunatic found his way backstage, late, after almost everyone was gone. Hannah had just left, and I was the last one in the dressing room. He was carrying flowers, and tried to tell me they were for me. He wouldn't let me past him, I was trapped in the corner, and he kept telling me how much he loved me, and slowly coming nearer.

Then suddenly Dominic was holding me, Daniel had put himself between us and the strange man, and there these sharp cracks from where I couldn't see around Daniel. It wasn't until later I realised that the cracks were from Ethan's fists as he beat the man bloody.

The three of them had saved me from my stalker, them and Hannah, who had worked out what was happening and brought them. The police came a little later, but the stalker was taken away in an ambulance instead of a police car.

There wasn't ever a trial, or not one I had to go to. The police said that he pled insanity, and he'll be in a secure hospital ward for a long time.

Ever since then I've found that I'm very wary around men – well, most men. Dominic, Daniel and Ethan are exceptions. I'm closer to them than ever, and I feel safe with them. I didn't perform the last show, because I knew there would be more men in the audience.

And then there's Ellen. I guess getting close to Ethan just made it inevitable that I'd become close to his twin, and I wanted... I guess I don't know what I wanted, just that she was there and we became... intimate. I'd never tried being with a woman before, never even thought of it, but it happened.

Safety-Free

There's one thing that has changed in a fairly big way since the last time I performed. The aerial performers have chosen to do this show without safety harnesses. It was Ellen's suggestion, an idea intended to make our acts seem even more spectacular. Aerial acts have always been the mainstay of the company's performances, and when it came out a while back that the company has been having financial problems, Ellen pointed out that we might draw larger crowds by working without safety lines and increasing the apparent danger of our acts.

It's not the sort of decision that Ellen could make for the rest of us, though. There were a lot of discussions about it. None of it was really such a big deal to me, as I always preferred to avoid safety rigging when doing my tissu acts – there's just too much that you can't do with safety ropes, because they would tangle with the silks. I think my support meant a lot to Ellen, though, because if too few of us supported the idea, it wouldn't be going ahead.

Alice surprised me by supporting the idea too. If it wasn't for that, we'd have been outvoted, but Alice, Ellen and me made three out of four female aerialists, and we're the ones at greatest risk because we are usually fliers, rather than catchers.

The Fall

Tonight is going to be the first time I've performed in public since the attack. I'm scared. I think about the eyes of all those men in the audience, watching me, and my skin crawls. I can still do the act, the tissu still feels so good around my legs, and the others tell me that I'm performing better than ever. But I don't know if I'm ready for this. I know the men in the company are better than the man who attacked me, and I feel safe with Daniel, Ethan and Dominic especially, but I needed someone who understands, someone who really loves me.

So after the rehearsal, I decided to go back to Ellen's room. I asked Dominic to find Ellen and send her to me – I knew he'd do that for me, and be discreet. It took ages for Ellen to turn up – Dominic must have had trouble finding her. Ellen seemed to have something on her mind at first, but when she realised I needed her, she gave me her full attention. She held me and comforted me, and eventually we made love. It really helped, all the tension drained out of me, at least for a while.

I dozed off afterwards. I woke up a little when Ellen disentangled herself from me, but I let her go. I watched her pawing through her suitcase, with my eyes half-closed. I didn't see what she took, but she obviously found what she was looking for, something small enough to be hidden in the palm of her hand as she left the room.

I let myself drift back to sleep. The stress recently has left me bone tired, and I didn't wake up until the police knocked on the door. I was wearing Ellen's dressing gown when they told me Alice had fallen.

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

Just about everyone put Alice up on a pedestal, and she did deserve to be there. She was as good as they say. She was welcome to that pedestal, though. I didn't want it, just to do my act.

Bethany Summer

Bethany has never had an aerial role in all the time I've been here, but I have often seen her training in trapeze with Alice. She's been putting a lot of work into that, though the talk I've been hearing says that I was very lucky to get to do aerial work, so I'm not sure when Bethany thought she would get the chance to use aerial training. She seems nice to me, but I get the feeling that Ellen doesn't really like her.

Caitlin Chin

When we do our cradle act, it will be the first time I've performed with Caitlin. She's very good, much more experienced than me. I used to think she was a little cold, but I've gotten to know her better since we started working together, and since I started spending more time with Daniel. The two of them are close friends.

Daniel Higgs

Since I was attacked, I've spent a lot of time with Daniel. His physique is incredible, a match for his talent. I'm now acutely aware of how men look at me, and when I'm in public with Daniel, they all back off. I think he knows he is having that effect, and plays to it for my benefit.

Daniel has told me that he's gay. It's not something that he bandies about, but when the conversation went that way, he didn't try to hide it either. That actually makes me feel even safer with him.

Dominic Richards

I've actually known Dominic for almost as long as I've known Brian. He's always been a great friend, and he's been more supportive than anyone since, well, since I stopped performing. When he put his arms

around me, even before Daniel was standing over us, I knew straight away that I was going to be safe. Not okay, not for a while, but safe, and it means a lot to me that Dominic hasn't pushed me into being okay before I'm ready.

Ellen Telyanin

I never thought it possible to love someone so much – she's sweet, caring and I can't imagine life without her. I always used to think she was a little cold but after I was attacked she came to my rooms and wouldn't leave me alone – I screamed and hit at her but she stayed and held me til I cried myself to sleep. And then she did the same thing the next night and the one after that and kept it up until one night I could sleep without bad dreams. I always thought I was straight until Ellie came along but it felt so natural and right.

Ethan Telyanin

Everybody else seems appalled at what Ethan did to the stalker, but I'm glad he did. If I had Ethan's strength and size, I'd have done it myself.

And Ethan isn't so bad. He's really only aggressive when others are aggressive towards him, or towards those he cares about, like his sister Ellen or me. He's proud, too, and he should be. You have to be, when everybody wants to tear you down.

Hannah Riordan

I used to find Hannah really off-putting. She just didn't seem to have any consideration for anyone, like she didn't know or care what they felt.

Dominic and Daniel assured me it was Hannah who worked out what was going on when I was attacked, and if she hadn't, they might not have gotten there in time. After that, I figured I should give her another chance. She obviously did care at least a little bit.

So now, I'm pretty sure she doesn't mean to be rude. She just doesn't do very well

socially. I'm glad she's my friend, and I have been trying to help her with that.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy is Ellen and Ethan's younger brother. Because of that, I've been trying to get to know him. I find it hard to connect with him or to trust him, which is entirely unfair of me, but I can't help it, and I'm slowly getting there. It is easier with Jeremy than with many men, though, because of Ellen and Ethan.

John Perrett

I haven't had much to do with John except for a little cradle practice. He isn't even an understudy for that, so I'm unlikely to ever perform with him. He has a really odd physique, almost androgynous, and his slight body allows Daniel to catch him, but his strength lets him catch me.

Lily Gardner

Lily has always seemed very steady and gentle, and I'm sure I should have liked her, but I've been finding that she treats me with kid gloves recently. It seems like she pities me, and I don't need that from her. I am *not* just a victim.

Luke Conolly

When I first started here, I heard rumours about Luke. A few guys said things like, "Ooh, new girl, better watch out for Luke." It always seemed pretty much like a joke, though. Hopefully it was a pretty old one, because he was already engaged to his performance partner Maria when I started here. They are married now.

Maria Conolly

Maria is only a couple of years old than me, but she's so much further ahead in life, or so it seems. She's married to a man she obviously loves very much, she seems to know where her career is going, she makes her own decisions in life. I think I should feel like a child beside her, but I've never felt she treats me like one.

Matthew Mills

I used to find Matthew's flirty antics amusing, but they got old a long time ago, and these days he just seems like a slimeball.

Nigel Telyanin

Nigel is Ellen and Ethan's uncle. He got them their jobs here, after their family's circus went bust. He's also widely regarded as the expert on putting together a performance of almost any sort. I don't mean that he's an expert on every form of circus act, of course – nobody could be master of them all! – but he knows more about using performers' skills to tell a story than anyone. It's odd that he's always had relatively little advice for me.

Ophelia Seymour

I've found that everybody watches me these days, as if they are waiting for me to miss and step and fall in a heap, but Ophelia watches more closely than anyone. Sorry, Ophelia, I'm not going to give you the satisfaction.

Paul Morris

Paul has become a good friend of Dominic's, but Dominic's also mentioned how frustrating it can be to work with Paul when he doesn't really care about his performance. There's been talk about Paul learning to be a rigger, but if he can't apply himself to clowning, I don't see how anyone would trust him with their rigging.

Susan Michaels

I've found that I feel a certain rapport with Susan. We started here at the same time, and she reminds me a lot of myself, or how I was before I really got into my circus training. At the moment she does mostly clowning because she doesn't have the training to match her talent, but there's been a big push to develop her skills. Jeremy has been responsible for a lot of her training, but it is obvious that he is interested in more than her circus skills. I do envy her ability to approach that so casually.