

Susan MichaelsAge 15; *Trampoline, Cradle (Flier)*

You know how people talk about running away to join the circus? Well, I really did.

“Michaels” isn’t my real name. I’m really Susan Michalek, and I’m only 15 years old. I started using a different name when I left home because my real name is so distinctive, and I didn’t want to be found.

Things were bad at home, so bad I don’t even like to think about it any more. I had to leave, so I did.¹

I used to do gymnastics, when I was going to school. I was good, real good. I got lucky when I found out that this circus troupe was holding auditions. By then, I didn’t have any money or anywhere to stay, and I really needed the job. I wasn’t even very strong, ’cause I hadn’t been eating enough, but Nigel insisted that he wanted me. He didn’t even care that I had no real circus training, said I was a natural, and that they could give training but they couldn’t give talent. Him and Ophelia made it happen, somehow.

So now I’ve got money and a place to stay, and nobody knows where to find me. I’ve been training with Jeremy a lot, because Nigel says I should become an acrobat and that he can’t train me as well as Jeremy can for that. God, that’s hard, having to be with Jeremy all that time and concentrate on the training. I’m the understudy for his trampoline act, too, so that’s even more training with him. But at the moment, my main role is as a clown, so I have to spend a lot of time training for that with Nigel and the other clowns too.

It’s hard work, but I love it. I never really thought gymnastics would be more than a hobby for me. If my parents ever find out where I am, though, there’s no way they’d let me stay here.

Street Performance

A few months back, there was a week when none of the clowns got paid on time, and neither did a few of the others. Most of us performers hadn’t really been paying too much attention to the financial status of the company. I’d been more than happy to just trust Ophelia for that sort of thing, and she made sure that we all got paid within a couple of days. Still, it worries me, worries everybody. What if the company can’t keep us all, can’t pay everyone’s wages? And isn’t the last hired always the first laid off if it comes to that?

Not long after that, Luke talked with a bunch of us about some new ideas to help the company deal with the erratic income – opportunities for extra shows in smaller venues, street performance, shopping centres, that sort of thing. The only problem is, the company has built such a reputation on the aerial acts, and for a lot of those shows, aerial work just wouldn’t be possible. It just involves too much apparatus.

Jeremy likes the ideas, but in private he’s told me about his own version of the plan. He’s talking about breaking away from the company entirely with a group of acrobats and clowns. He says the overheads associated with the aerial acts is massive, and with things the way they are, we can make a much better go of things without them and the large shows that we have to do to make the big aerial acts worthwhile. I don’t know what I’ll do if he goes ahead with that. Thinking about leaving the company with Jeremy feels like I’m betraying Ophelia and Nigel, after all they’ve done for me, but... it’s Jeremy.

The Fall

After this morning’s rehearsal, I went and hung out in the canteen with Hannah and Dominic for a while. Nigel had asked us to stick around for another rehearsal this afternoon, just the

¹The player is invited to make up whatever details they see fit concerning Susan’s old life.

clowns, and he had mentioned that there was something he wanted to talk to us about too. He had some other things to do first, though, so we just sat and talked for a while, until Jeremy came and joined us.

Things always get so confusing with Jeremy. He's so intense, just so *there* all the time. I can't think when he's around, there are these butterflies in my stomach, and I think of doing things that I'm not sure I'm ready for. I like being with him, maybe too much.

But there's one time when he has to stay away; that's when I'm training. For the show, I mean, not the extra training. Jeremy and I don't do much together during the show, so when I rehearse for the show, he has to stay away. It helps me clear my head, and Nigel likes me to do it. So I excused myself and headed off to the rehearsal area. I took my time in the change rooms on the way, since there was really no rush and I didn't want to be overtired for tonight.

John was already on the stage, but neither of us needs much space, usually, so we spread out and each worked on our own. Maria and Lily were working on the tightwire, too. Maybe a half hour later, Alice and Matt came in too. John stopped and walked past me, setting up his equipment away from the centre. He would have been right underneath where...

So Alice and Matt climbed the ladders. I stopped for a minute to watch, because they are always so spectacular together. Matt pushed off first, swung three times, then Alice leapt. It should have been such a simple move, they always start off easy, but something was wrong. Alice came off her trapeze too low. I didn't see it until she stretched for the catch, the timing seemed right, but he just didn't reach her.

She screamed as she fell, and twisted in the air. She sort of landed on her side, and bounced onto her back, and I didn't know what to do. I just stood there and stared. I don't think she saw me, and she had a funny expression on her face, almost like she was trying to smile but couldn't quite get it right. She said, "She'll finally get what she wanted."

Then John was in front of me, shouting at me. "Call an ambulance!" he said. So I ran to my bag and called from my prepaid. After the operator got the details of how to get here, she told me to go back to her, but when I did she was already gone.

The Interview

After it happened, the police interviewed everyone, but they kept me for longer than the others. Maybe that's because I was right there when it happened, they thought I could tell them more. I tried to tell them what I saw, I didn't want to lie about what happened, but I didn't tell them my real name. Not at first.

But then one of the detectives asked to see my ID, and when all I had was my ATM card asked what he'd find out if he ran the name. So I told him.

I was afraid he'd take me away, maybe back to my parents, but he didn't. He sat with me for a while, asked me more questions about why I was there. The detective's partner checked out my ID and then he explained what would happen.

He said they'd have to let my parents know I'd been found, but they didn't have to say where. My well-being is for the Department of Human Services to look after, not homicide cops, and they'd send someone to talk to me, probably in the next couple of days. They might let me stay, or they might make me stay in a hostel or with relatives. Or they could send me home.

I want to stay here, but they won't let me if they don't think I'm safe. Right now I've got money, and food and clothes. Somewhere to stay, even if it is mostly hotels. But the DHS will need to know who is looking after me.

I need this job, and someone to speak up for me, and if breaking away with Jeremy is what it takes...

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

Alice was so beautiful, so graceful and poised when she was in the air. To me she always seemed a true star. I could hardly talk to her, I'd get so flustered.

Jeremy and Nigel kept telling me that one day, I could be a star, just like Alice. They said I have a long way to go yet, but if I was dedicated to my training, I could do it one day.

But after seeing her fall, I can't help but think maybe one day *that* could be me too.

Bethany Summer

I've never gotten to spend much time with Bethany. She used to spend all her time with Alice – training,

Caitlin Chin

Caitlin is one of the most experienced aerialists in the company. I've had a fair bit of time to rehearse with her, because I'm the understudy for her cradle partner, Gwen. She's been good to work with, very patient with me even when I know I haven't done as well as Gwen.

Daniel Higgs

Daniel actually kind of scares me a bit. He's never done anything to make me scared of him, it's more what he doesn't do. Like, he's always so serious, hardly ever smiles, and the way he moves, it's like he could just march straight through a wall and it'd crumple like paper.

Dominic Richards

Dominic started with the company the same time I did, along with Gwen. He and Gwen were friends when they started, and it was easy to see that he had a thing for Gwen, but Dominic said she had a boyfriend. Then Gwen and Ellen were together, and Dominic missed out.

I was worried for a while that Dominic might hit on me, after that happened, but he never did. Maybe he's just a nice guy.

Ellen Telyanin

I'm not sure that Ellen really knows I exist and sometimes I wonder whether it's better that way. She is Jeremy's sister, and I didn't realise that brother and sister could be so different. Maybe I'm being a little bit harsh on her though – she's a first-rate performer and I guess she's got so much confidence she can seem a bit overbearing.

Ethan Telyanin

Ethan is Jeremy's brother and Ellen's twin. Physically, he is much like Jeremy – the way he moves is so strong and so confident. But he seems to lack Jeremy's gentle side.

Gwen Palmer

Gwen started with this circus with me and Dominic, but unlike us, Gwen started at the top, with aerial performance. Most performers start with something more basic, usually clowning, but Gwen does such a beautiful tissu act... a bit too beautiful, since it inspired some nutcase to attack her one night.

I'm the understudy for Gwen's cradle act, so I've spend some rehearsal time with her and Caitlin, her partner.

Everyone knows there's something going on between Gwen and Ellen, something dirty. Somehow she managed to go straight from a boyfriend in Sydney to sleeping with a woman here.

Hannah Riordan

Weirdo. Hannah's specialty is fire-twirling, and it's almost as if she chose the fire to keep people away. Nobody ever seems to be able to get close to her, or want to. She's one of us, a clown, and the rest of us clowns look out for her, but even for the circus, she's a freak.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy has been my closest friend ever since I started with the circus. I don't think he even realises just how much he means to me. He wants to be more than just friends,

though, and I think I do too. We hang out together a lot, and I get all silly when we do. I know he flirts with me, and I do my best to flirt back.

But he's a lot older than me, and I'm not sure how much I'm ready for. I haven't told him anything about leaving home, or how young I am.

John Perrett

John was very active during the run of our last show, trying to make up for missing two acrobats. Luckily he's a very versatile performer. I've been able to do some training with him, and it's been really interesting, because working with him and Jeremy together, he's able to show me what he wants me to do using Jeremy as a partner, then I can take his place and he takes Jeremy's place. He can do that because his body is lighter than any of the other male acrobats, but a bit heavier than the women.

Lily Gardner

Lily is Maria's closest friend, and was Maid of Honour for her wedding. That meant that she organised the hen's night, too, the one I didn't show up to. She's been harder to avoid than Maria, because she was here for the last show, but fortunately she never seemed to want to talk to me even before the hen's night.

Luke Conolly

I haven't gotten much of a chance to know Luke, not as well as some of the others, because he didn't perform in our most recent show. He was off on his honeymoon with Maria.

Maria Conolly

Maria got married a while back, to Luke. I was invited to the hen's night, but I didn't show up, because I know I would have had to show ID at some point, and I can't. I couldn't afford much of a gift for the wedding either. I also can't explain any of this to Maria, so I've tended to avoid her. Her being on honeymoon during the last

show's run made it easier to do that, but now I'm worried that I've offended her.

Matthew Mills

Matthew was Alice's trapeze partner, which made him a star too. It's the flier who draws the most attention in a trapeze act, but the catcher is just as much a part of it as the flier. So, Matthew is like Alice, except male and friendly... a little too friendly, really, though he doesn't seem to mean any harm by it. But he's hot, and he flaunts it.

Nigel Telyanin

Nigel is the old man of the company, about my parents' age, I think. Everybody in the company looks up to him, except maybe his niece and nephews. Ellen in particular can be quite rude to him – that's family for you.

He's a fantastic clown, so funny, and he knows so much about performance. He helps everyone put their acts together, though technically he's only in charge of the clowns. Sometimes I feel like he treats me like a kid, but then, he treats everyone the same, and I guess I really could have been his kid.

Ophelia Seymour

Ophelia is the only person who knows that I've run away. She's part owner of the company, although almost nobody knows that, and she's the one who organised for me to get the job. When I joined the company, I didn't have any bank accounts or anything like that. I couldn't keep things secret from her, so I told her instead. Ophelia helped me get everything set up.

She promised not to tell anyone where I'd come from, and I said I wouldn't tell anyone her secret either.

Paul Morris

I like hanging out with Paul. He's very relaxed and easy-going. So many people around here are so intense, it's nice to just be able to sit back with a friend. He's pretty average as a performer, though.

Paul is dating one of the riggers, a woman named Cecelia.