

## **Luke Conolly**

Age 24; **Risley**, *Chinese Pole*, *Adagio*

I was one of the first performers to join the company, back when there were less than a dozen of us. It seems a long time ago now, though really it has only been a couple of years. I suppose it feels that way because such an important part of my life.

I met Maria when she joined during the troupe's first phase of expansion. We discovered that we work very well together, just about in perfect sync. It didn't take long for our relationship to grow beyond the professional. It's a common thing in circus, though far from universal. About a year ago, we announced our engagement to the troupe.

But I haven't always been as good to Maria as I try to make it seem.

### ***The Buck's Night***

I don't know why I did it. Or maybe I do. Maybe I was scared, didn't think I could handle the commitment. Maybe some part of me wanted to do something that'd stop the wedding. Or maybe I'm just a fuckwit who thinks with his dick.

It was Lily's idea to get everyone from the buck's night and the hen's night together late in the evening. I told myself I didn't mind the idea just because some of the girls in the company are such good friends of mine, but I'm not sure now if that was really it. I knew we'd be out at the strip joints earlier in the evening, but that was mostly for the benefit of some of my non-circus friends. Strippers don't do much for me. But Alice was another matter. I'd been attracted to her ever since she joined the company, and I could tell she was attracted to me too. We'd flirt – we didn't mean to, it just happened. Sometimes wind up touching each other without even meaning to. But it wasn't like with Maria, we didn't have the same connection, it was just physical.

We all met up at Lily's apartment a little after midnight. I was more than a little drunk by then, and so was just about everybody else. Alice looked more appetising than ever, even as unsteady on her feet as she was. Maria was busy partying with the bridesmaids, my mates were all too pissed to notice what I was up to... I thought nobody noticed when Alice and I slipped into Lily's roomie's bedroom.

You can't pull one over on Ellen, and if I hadn't been so drunk, I'd have thought of that. I heard the door open, and sat up in the bed just quick enough to catch a camera flash full in the face. I had my pants half on by the time my vision cleared, but it was too late. John was standing in the doorway staring at us.

John and I talked about it the next day. He promised he'd never tell Maria, but he wasn't the problem. He told me that it was Ellen who had the photo. Maybe he could take care of the problem, he said. Maybe, if I was very lucky. I don't know what he meant, but the wedding went ahead, so I guess Maria never found out.

Goddamn that was stupid. I almost lost the woman I love, and why? Because I was scared of spending the rest of my life with just her? I just don't believe I did that... or that I got caught.

### ***Street Performance***

A few months back, the company's financial problems came to a head. About half the company didn't get paid. The clowns were all up in arms about it, as not a one of them got a payslip. The office staff said that was a coincidence, but Nigel has seen too much discrimination against clowns to buy that, not when the big stars all got paid.

It got sorted out within a couple of days, they just had to transfer some funds from another account. Still, when the company's finances are lean enough that you have to transfer money

into the payroll account that way, you know there's big problems. I figured sitting on my arse complaining about it wasn't going to help, so I've been taking a look at other possibilities.

I presented my findings at a meeting a couple of weeks ago. To keep the numbers down, I just invited the acrobats and the clowns, not the aerialists. That's Jeremy, Bethany, John, Lily, Maria, Nigel, Ophelia, Paul, Hannah, Dominic and Susan. I had been looking into the possibility of street performance. All twelve of us have skills that would translate very well to street-work. I'm not just talking about busking, either. Street performers can make a bit just from what passersby donate, but not enough to make it worth the time of a dozen performers.

But there are government sponsorships, from both local and state levels, and some of the shopping centres will pay a certain amount for a troupe of professionals, or let us sell tickets. There's smaller theatre venues, too, places that aren't suitable for rigging a trapeze, but which can handle our floor equipment or even a low wire.

We've been missing out by not considering these alternatives, and the way things have been going, we can't afford that any more. Sure, the company's style would have to change, we'd need to focus on more flexible acts that don't require quite so much precision. We'd have to de-emphasise the acts that require heavy rigging. But we could do it, and we could still do the big shows that we've built our reputation on.

At the time, there was general support for the plan. I thought I'd be able to get enough of us behind it to at least give it a go, but a few days ago Jeremy told me about his own plan. He had come up with a crazy idea about dropping the big shows and the aerial acts entirely, cut the overheads of equipment costs and venue hire. He even said he wanted to look at leaving the company to make it work.

That's not what I meant at all. The aerialists are part of our troupe; they're *family*. And street performance for a group our size, well, it'd draw in some cash, but I doubt it'd be enough to sustain us. I told him that I didn't think it'd work, and I certainly wasn't going to help him with it.

I need to rally support from the others to block Jeremy's move, but I really don't know who falls where, and with today's disaster... I just don't know how much loyalty to the company the others still have.

## ***The Fall***

I wasn't anywhere near the theatre when Alice fell from six metres above the stage. I was doing some shopping off alone. Maria and I got away from the theatre as soon as we could after the final dress rehearsal this morning, just stayed long enough to change out of our costumes, and I didn't return until Maria called to tell me to come back to the theatre immediately.

We shared the shower back in our hotel room, then went off to a rushed lunch. I would have liked to have taken longer, but Maria had promised to do some extra last-minute training with Lily on the tightwire, and didn't want to keep her waiting too long. She said it wouldn't take long, and then we could spend the rest of the afternoon together.

After lunch, I walked her back to the theatre, then headed off on my own to do some shopping. I figured if I get the toothpaste and such, we wouldn't be wasting more time doing that when we could spend it in private together.

On my way, I spotted Matt across the street, heading for the theatre. I almost called out to him, but then decided I'd rather just get on with my shopping. I got about half of it done before I had to spend the rest of the afternoon talking with the police.

## **Other People**

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

I had been worried about how Alice would react when she found out about my plan. Small troupes have no place for big stars, it's true ensemble or bust. Not that Alice didn't deserve her stardom, she really filled Tina's shoes well, and with class.

### **Bethany Summer**

Beth is billed as an acrobat at the moment, but she'd been training heavily with Alice and Matt recently, mostly on aerial work. Caitlin is the official understudy for Alice's role, but it seems like Beth has been doing more training for that role than Caitlin. I've had to wonder why Alice was so focussed on training Beth that way.

The result of all that training is that Beth has a relatively small part in the current show. She's the understudy for several other acts, though.

### **Caitlin Chin**

Our recent female aerialists seem have gotten really bitchy of late, and we all know it's fuelled by ambition. Caitlin has largely stood aside from all of that, though. She just wants to put on a good show, and if that means somebody else is better for a top part, she accepts that. I respect that. Still, that doesn't mean that she was necessarily happy about how Alice came in.

### **Daniel Higgs**

This man has absolute self-control. I'm not just talking about his act, either. I could stand to learn a thing or two from him that way. I suppose I could teach him a thing or two also. He's ripped, but the robot routine really doesn't get the girls. I don't think he's been laid since the troupe was formed.

I didn't include Daniel in the meeting I held, but he might be worth talking to. He's not so heavily invested in aerial routines as some of the others. He's also great with acrobalance.

### **Dominic Richards**

Dominic should be fully in favour of my plans. After all, last in, first out in times of financial hardship, and of the three newest performers, his skills are the least stand-out.

### **Ellen Telyanin**

Ellen...confuses me. Some days I think she's an absolute bitch but then she goes and surprises me. First, there's the tenderness with which she cared for Gwen and then there's the fact she knows about what happened with Alice but she's never said a word about it to anyone. I guess, deep down, she's an alright person it's just that feeling she has to prove herself all the time makes her come across as a bit of an overbearing cow.

### **Ethan Telyanin**

Ethan is Ellen's twin brother. He's not as smart as she is and although he's talented he's also dangerously bad-tempered. Ellen does seem to be pretty good at keeping him from going off most of the time though.

### **Gwen Palmer**

Gwen is one of the newest performers to join our little company. Despite the fierce competition for roles amongst the aerialists, she stepped straight into their coterie with her stunning tissu performances.

Unfortunately, Gwen was attacked by some maniac after a performance one night. Maria and I weren't there, but we heard all about it later. Everyone tries to take care of Gwen now, especially Ethan, Daniel and Dominic, who saved her from the psycho.

Since then, Gwen has entered into a relationship with Ellen.

### **Hannah Riordan**

She's a strange one – she's always watching but never really seeing. People seem to confuse her. She seems much happier on her own but Maria can't help but try to take her under her wing.

**Jeremy Telyanin**

I should have known the little bastard would try a stunt like this. His elder brother and sister have been trouble for the aerialists, it was only a matter of time before blood won out.

**John Perrett**

John has shown me time and time again how much I can count on him. In the old days, he was always my wing-man when we hit the town. Then he saved my ass with Maria, I still have no idea how he backed Ellen off. Now, I'm going to need support to keep this troupe from tearing itself apart with Jeremy's idiocy. I know I can count on John. One of these days, I have to find a way to pay him back for everything he's done for me.

**Lily Gardner**

Lily and I have been friends for ages, but we got a lot closer when Maria joined the company. Maria chose to partner with each of us for different acts, with great success in both cases. I got a wife, and Lily got a best friend.

Lily is naturally cautious. I haven't had a chance to talk to her about Jeremy's plan yet, but I should be able to get her on-side if I play on that caution. Or maybe I could let John take care of her? He and Lily are pretty close.

**Maria Conolly**

Maria is my lovely wife. We sat out the last show, so we'd have time for our honeymoon. I love her very much, though I know my actions in recent months don't show it.

For this show, we've put together a spectacular display of strength and coordination in which I toss and catch Maria with my hands and feet, such that she doesn't touch the ground for several minutes. It's called "risley", though someone derisively dubbed it "girl-juggling". The aerialists think their acts are the most thrilling, but the strength and precision they need is nothing compared to what Maria and I do together.

**Matthew Mills**

I just wish he'd stop flirting with Maria – there are limits after all. I'm sure he doesn't mean anything by it but it really irks me. And then he can just switch off the charm and scream at poor Alice when he was the one who almost dropped her yesterday.

**Nigel Telyanin**

Nigel is a career clown. He's an expert in both physical comedy and physical drama, and so is involved in a lot of the choreography of our shows. Pretty much everyone respects him, too, especially the clowns. The exceptions there may be his niece and nephews, Ellen, Ethan and Jeremy.

He was fully in favour of my idea for doing performances in new venues. With him onside, there will be at least half a dozen other performers who will follow. I just have to make sure he stays onside.

**Ophelia Seymour**

Ophelia has always been a loyalist, does everything for the good of the company and the troupe. If she opposes my plan, at least I'll know that she's doing what she thinks is right. I doubt I have to worry about that, though, not with Jeremy pushing his scheme. 'Phelie will side with me just to stop him gutting us.

**Paul Morris**

Paul fancies himself for a rigger rather than a performer these days. Apparently that has to do with his girlfriend, Cecelia, who really is one of the riggers here. I hope he's not too wedded to the idea, because there may be less work for riggers if it goes ahead. He'd definitely still be of use, as he has the skills to do both, and that's really useful for a small show, but not full-time.

**Susan Michaels**

Though she's fairly inexperienced, Susan has some real talent. Unfortunately, there seems to be a relationship developing between Susan and Jeremy, which means I'm unlikely to get her to side with me against him. I'll have to try anyway.