



The audience was a bright colored blur below me as I made my way across the tightrope. I went through my routine easily, lifting a leg and holding it while listening to the applause. The tinny sound of the calliope filled my ears. Later as I climbed down the rope ladder, my thoughts were only of changing out of my itchy purple leotard.

Back in my caravan, I changed into a loose peach-colored dress and stockings. I glanced in the mirror and saw my mousy brown hair, cut into a chin-length bob, was now tangled and knotted. Behind me, I could see my mattress, well made and sparsely adorned with one brown blanket. Ana and Marta's mattresses were covered haphazardly with dresses and stockings, necklaces and shoes. I could hear Oscar calling for me outside so I wrapped myself in a shawl, opened the door, and walked down the steps. The sky was gray with clouds and the open field we were camped in did nothing to shield the cold. Oscar was walking towards me, stout in his suit vest and bowler hat, smoking a cigar.

"You did good today, Pip," he said. "You're gaining in popularity. We're going to have to make changes to your act." He kept walking and I followed him, passing the other caravans. The fairground was quiet and empty.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"People *like* you, I can tell, but your act's not exciting enough. You need to practice more, learn some new moves. Get someone to train you."

I pulled my shawl up over my shoulders. “But there aren’t any other rope walkers left now that Angela and Jack left.”

“They taught Nicolae before you— go ask him for help. You’re nearly grown, Pippa. You’re... you’re sixteen, aren’t you? I can’t be taking care of you forever. If you don’t succeed in this business, you’re on your own.”

Unsure if he really meant what I thought he did, that he would throw me out homeless and alone if I didn’t garner enough audience-appeal, I remained silent. I figured he had said it on a whim, but it was best not to draw attention.

Oscar stopped at a caravan and knocked. Charlotte, the newest addition to the circus, opened the door. She was still in her costume: a frilly, pastel-colored dress and big hat that she wore for her equestrian act. Her blonde hair was curled to perfection and her porcelain face glowed with rosy lips and cheeks. She was twenty-one, but gave off the air of someone older and more sophisticated. I had a dislike of her because she did not consider herself a circus person, instead calling herself a performer who was settling for the circus until she could find a better opportunity.

“Charlotte, you were wonderful,” Oscar said straight-faced as usual. “People were raving about your act. Keep it up.”

“Thank you, Oscar,” Charlotte said politely. She glanced at me before returning to her caravan and closing the door.

“Well?” Oscar said, looking at me. “Do you need something?”

“Oh... no,” I replied. “Well, I guess I was wondering. Since I *am* grown now, don’t you think I should be getting a salary?”

Oscar gave me a dirty stare.

“I mean,” I went on, “I know I am working for my food and housing, but since everyone else is paid, I think I only deserve to be as well, especially if I will be performing more complicated acts. And maybe someday I will make enough so that I can leave and you don’t have to take care of me anymore.”

Oscar had sustained his glare the whole time I had been talking, but now he sighed and looked off into the field. “Fine. After your new act, I’ll start paying you the same amount as Nicolae. Are you happy?”

“Yes, thank you, Oscar.” I smiled at him and touched his arm appreciatively.

“Alright,” he mumbled, shooing me away and making his way to the next caravan.

“Nicu,” I called, knocking on his door.

“Come in!”

Inside the caravan, Nicolae, Alfred, and Hartley were sitting on their mattresses, playing cards and smoking.

“Pippa! Come show Nicu here how to really play Black Jack,” Alfred said, grinning.

“He’s getting walloped,” Hartley added.

Nicolae was Ana and Marta’s brother and Mama Dobre’s only son and eldest child at twenty years old. Although at first trained as a rope walker, he had moved onto the trapeze shortly. He shared a caravan with Alfred and Hartley, both British men in their early thirties who performed acrobatics together.

I leaned against a wall. The inside of their caravan was a mess like mine, although it also had the distinct smell of gin and cigarettes.

“Oscar said I need to come up with a new act,” I said. “Do you think you could help me?”

“No problem,” Nicu said. Like the rest of his family, his hair was black and curly and his skin an olive complexion. He had the deepest brown eyes I had ever seen, so unlike my light green ones. “So what is the gaffer looking for?”

“More excitement,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Don’t look to Nicu for that,” said Alfred.

Oscar had found me as a baby in a basket outside his caravan nearly sixteen years ago. I was wrapped in a pink blanket with only a bottle of milk, fifteen dollars, and a piece of paper that read “Philippa.” My birth date was unknown; we always celebrated on the date I had been found. If it had been up to Oscar, I probably would have been sent to an orphanage, but he was persuaded to let me stay when Mama Dobre promised to raise me. Still, it was Oscar’s last name—Davies—that was now my own. I thought it had more to do with him not wanting an American girl being tarnished with a Romani surname than with any father-like pride. He did pay for my expenses, though, and was my legal guardian.

Mama and Tata Dobre took care of me along with Nicu, and then when Ana and Marta were born and I grew older, I started to notice the ways in which I was different from them. Some would say I was fortunate because gypsies were not treated well, not even in the circus community, but I thought they were the most beautiful people and

wanted only to be like them. Tata Dobre died from pneumonia shortly after Marta was born, when I was seven, and Mama never was quite the same after that.

By the time I was nine, Oscar had me performing in the ring. I started off doing acrobatic tumbling with Alfred and Hartley before settling into tightrope walking, which a young married couple named Angela and Jack instructed me in. They were an amazing act, as well as some of the sweetest people around, but they left a year ago when they were hired by Ringling. Mama Dobre was a cook for the circus; being larger and slow moving, she was not really the acrobatic type. It was Tata who was the trapeze artist and now his children were following his path. I was the only tightrope walker left, which was probably bad for the circus because I was not as skilled as I should have been. Nicu was skilled at rope walking, but he only wanted to perform on the trapeze.

“Let’s try a blindfold,” he suggested.

“Nicu, I’ll die.”

He laughed. “You won’t die. It sounds worse than it is. Don’t worry, I’ll help you.”

We started off on a wire closer to the ground. I took the cloth and wrapped it around my eyes. The world went dark. I held my balance pole and tried to remember to breathe, feeling my way carefully across the wire. Nicu was below on the ground watching me. “That’s it,” he was saying. “Good.” But then my foot slipped and I fell backwards, Nicu barely managing to catch me.

“Damn,” I swore under my breath, pulling the blindfold off. I was in his arms like a baby. He put me down and told me to try again.

Hours later, I was walking across the rope with the blindfold without too much trouble.

“Ready for the high wire?” Nicu asked. He was standing with his elbows making angles at his side, his hands on his hips.

“Tomorrow, Nicu,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

We practiced every day for hours at a time, barely talking, just practicing. When we did talk, it was reminiscing about the past or discussing the future. Nicu didn't want to stay in the circus forever. It seemed crazy to me because he was such a talented performer, but he said his heart wasn't in it. I could understand that. Sometimes he would touch my waist or back to help guide me across the wire or show me how to balance myself. We had grown up practically like siblings, yet not. I felt too much distance from him. Despite his talk of leaving the circus, he never really let me into his thoughts or feelings, so when he touched me those few times, it meant something at least.

I stood at the mirror, putting on my coat and hat, looking at my reflection: my long nose and thin lips, small bodied, almost fragile looking. Ana and Marta were sitting on the floor whispering a game of dolls. Ana, at fourteen, was too old to be playing with dolls, but she still did on occasion with her sister, who was ten. They never invited me to join them, not that I offered anymore. I watched Marta brush back her long curly hair with her hand so that it didn't fall in her face. When we were younger, Ana and I used to play together. We would make up stories to act out, sometimes elaborate fantasies about locked-up princesses or spiteful fairies, but often we just pretended we were normal. We

would pretend to be in school or live in a house. We'd pretend we didn't spend much of the year settling into a new town only to pack up and travel somewhere new a few weeks later. As we grew older, like with Nicu, there became a greater distance between us that I couldn't explain. Ana retreated into silence and would only really interact with Marta, for whatever reason.

I left the caravan without saying anything, intending to get some fresh night air. I stopped by Nicu's but Hartley and Alfred said he had stepped out about an hour ago. I talked with the two for a while, laughing about a mistake a clown had made during a show that day. The conversation then turned to Charlotte and the two men agreed with my opinion of her.

"She's had her eye on Nicu," Hartley said. "What a bird. Who does she think she is fooling with that holier-than-thou attitude?"

"Just because her father is a stablemaster... you would think he was master of the manor the way she talks," Alfred added.

I laughed. "She's ridiculous. Anyway, I should be off to bed, boys. Tell Nicu he missed out on a good time with us."

"Will do, sweetheart," said Hartley.

Walking back to my caravan, I heard Nicu grumbling in frustration. It was dark, but I could make out his silhouette walking towards me. I called to him.

"Pippa," he said, surprised. "I didn't see you."

"I barely see you now," I said, coming closer.

"What are you doing up?" he asked. He seemed distracted, not looking at me.

"I needed some air. Do you want to take a walk?"

Having a man beside me, I felt it was safe enough to walk through the woods surrounding the fairground. We wandered in silence, side by side. I could hear him breathing and sensed a tension in his body. Usually Nicu was relaxed with perfect posture in a way that reminded me of his father, but tonight his shoulders were near his ears and his legs moved more stiffly.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I’m just tired.”

We walked for a while more until we came upon a small clearing in the trees, just enough that we had a remarkable view of the moon. It was completely full and unusually yellow.

“Look at that,” I said, gazing up. “It’s beautiful.”

Without thinking, I took his hand in mine. He started at my touch, but then was still. We stood like that for a long time before I felt his other hand touch my waist like I had felt it so many times. Surrounded in darkness, I felt his body against mine and then he was kissing me. I had never been kissed before, except for the time when I was nine and there was a boy about my age in the circus; his family had only been with us for a year or so, and he had given me a peck on the lips as an experiment, but that wasn’t the same. As Nicu kissed me, it was so completely different that I thought there should be another word for it.

He was pulling me down to the ground now and I felt the grass on my legs. We were kissing and he was sliding his hands up my dress, pulling my stockings down. I took off my brown ankle-strapped shoes and cloche hat. I ran my fingers through his

thick, curly hair and touched his cheek. Soon he was on top of me, kissing my neck. Beneath him, I looked up at the moon watching over us.

The next morning I lay in bed thinking about the previous night. I couldn't stop thinking about anything or anyone else. I imagined our wedding someday, my official entrance into the Dobre family, Ana and Marta as bridesmaids. The two of us could perform together, or even leave the circus and try to find other work.

I went to find Nicu, but he wasn't in his caravan. As I walked past Charlotte's, I heard her door open and close. I looked behind me to catch a glimpse of the princess herself, but instead saw Nicu, who immediately averted his gaze when he saw me. He was still wearing his clothes from last night, black trousers and a light blue sweater. Charlotte opened the door, glancing at me for a second, and then turned to Nicu.

"Please don't put off talking to your mother any longer," she said to him.

"I won't," he replied as she closed the door again, her blond curls bouncing.

I stood looking at him. "What was that about?" I asked finally.

"I'm leaving," he said, looking back at me with his dark eyes. "I'm going with Charlotte."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"Pippa." He walked closer and touched my arm. "This is my chance to get out of here. Charlotte's father can get me a job at the manor where he works. I can start to build my way up, make something of myself."

I felt numb. I crossed my arms in front of my chest. "But why would he do that for you?"

"We're going to get married. Charlotte and I."

My throat tightened. “You don’t love her,” I asserted.

He shrugged. “I haven’t known her long enough to know. But I’ve thought about this a lot, Pippa. This is my one shot at leaving this damn circus and I’m going to take it. Her father will give me a good job to start off and maybe I can get promoted after a few years. I told you I wouldn’t be here forever. You knew that.”

“Last night…” was all I could pathetically mumble.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” he said, lowering his voice. “I was frustrated with Charlotte and maybe I didn’t make a good decision last night, but I thought it was what you wanted.”

“I want *you*,” I said. The numbness was subsiding now, and tears were starting to form in my eyes. “I want you not to leave me.”

Nicu took my arm and led me away from Charlotte’s caravan and back behind his. “Pippa, I’m sorry. You’re like a sister to me; I don’t want to see you hurting. I thought I was doing you a favor, but I guess I made a mistake.”

I wanted to take my fist and punch him in the jaw. I wanted to throw him to the ground and beat him until he turned to the dust that was beneath our feet. Instead I just turned away and cried, gasping for air.

It had been four months since Nicu left with Charlotte. In this time, the circus had traveled several times to different locations. We hadn’t heard anything from Nicu; his family hadn’t even been invited to the wedding. Mama Dobre was upset that he was not married in the Catholic Church and she prayed for him nightly. When I realized my

stomach was growing, and at an unusually quick pace, I knew Mama had bigger things to be praying for.

I kept the pregnancy a secret, letting people figure it out on their own, which they all did soon enough. They loved to gossip about me, speculating who the father was, a circus person or an outsider. I had made up my mind right away that I would never tell anyone and because it didn't seem likely the father was one of us, everyone assumed it had been someone in one of the towns.

Soon it became apparent that I would no longer be able to perform in the show for risk of endangering my and the baby's health.

"What are you going to do after the kid's born?" Oscar asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "Start performing in the show again."

"Hm," Oscar said.

There was a man who sat in the audience nearly every day that we were performing in our current town. He had a small moustache and always wore a white Panama hat with a navy blue jacket and tie, oddly well dressed for attending a circus. I guessed he was probably in his thirties or forties. He was never with anyone; it was always just him sitting there, staring at me from below. By the way he was dressed and the fact that he was able to come every day in the middle of the afternoon, I assumed he came from wealth. We occasionally had men who would often come to stare at the girls performing, although they were usually dressed quite poorly. Still, I didn't think much of him.

I had taken leave of performing for about a week when the man first came to visit me. Oscar led him to my caravan and knocked, calling, "Pip, you have a visitor!" When

I opened the door, I was surprised to see the man there. He was looking at me shyly, his eyes examining my stomach, which must have looked larger in person than up on the high wire. Oscar left and I stepped outside, closing the door behind me. I stood at the top of the steps so that I was looking down at the man a little. Up close I realized he was younger than I had thought, perhaps in his late twenties.

“I came because- because I hadn’t seen you in a long time,” he said as if he knew me. “I was wondering if you had left, but then that man told me you were ill.”

“Yes,” I said.

He looked at my stomach again. “Will you be returning to the show... after?”

I shrugged, smiling politely. “I haven’t made any plans, sir.”

“You are so graceful and elegant on the tightrope. I come as often as I can, just to see the beauty in your performance.” He was fidgeting with his hands, rolling his knuckles against his other palm.

“You are very kind. “ I put a hand on my stomach. “Well, thank you for your concern...”

“Oh- oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m James Preston.” He shook my hand.

“Philippa Davies.”

“If you don’t mind me saying, Mrs. Davies...”

“Miss. I am not wed,” I said, looking Mr. Preston in the eye as I spoke.

“Ah, Miss Davies,” he amended after a pause. “You- you were my favorite act, but there was something different about you, like- like you didn’t belong there. You

reminded me of the- the hostesses I see when I occasionally attend grand parties, but there you were, up on a tightrope.”

I was surprised and laughed a little. “Me? A hostess? I was raised by gypsies.”

“But you aren’t one.”

His proper style of dress was what had made me think he was older, but his face was youthful, earnest, and even innocent. He had managed to sum up my life in a sentence, but he seemed to think of my not belonging as a virtue.

When I was silent, he said, “I hope I have not bothered you.”

“Not at all.”

“In that case, I was wondering... would you mind if I called again sometime?”

Bewildered, I managed to shake my head.

“Good, well, I will leave you now. Thank you for seeing me, Miss Davies.”

His pale face was smiling now as he walked backwards, eventually turning and striding across the field toward the road.

When I saw him vanish from the fairground, I walked to Hartley and Alfred’s caravan. I was so distressed that I opened the door without knocking. Immediately I heard frantic shouts, “Hey! Knock first! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh!” I said, too shocked to look away. The two men were lying entangled in bed: Alfred in Hartley’s arms, their legs intertwined. Hartley was shirtless, exposing curly light hair across his chest. Alfred moved away quickly, sitting up in bed. His dark brown hair was flying off in every direction on his head.

“Oh, it’s only Pippa,” Hartley said, reaching for a cigarette from the pack on the nightstand near him. Alfred didn’t look as at ease, avoiding my gaze.

“I’m- I’m sorry to barge in,” I stammered. “It’s just that I’ve had a rather unusual visitor.”

“Come sit down,” Hartley said, motioning to the mattress. I went and sat at the end. Alfred took a smoke from Hartley and pretended to be preoccupied with it.

“Do you know that man who comes nearly every day, with the Panama hat and moustache?”

“Oh, the man that was eyeing you,” said Hartley, pulling his knees up to chin and brushing at his dark oxford bag pants.

“You noticed?”

“Of course. He’s quite the character, isn’t he?”

“Yes, well, I thought after seeing me in my present state, he would leave right away. But after learning I was unmarried, he asked if he could call again.”

“Well, that *is* interesting.”

“He’s too old for you,” Alfred said, speaking for the first time, but still looking down at his cigarette.

“Oh, age is just a number,” Hartley replied.

“He’s actually younger than he seems, but still nearly thirty I’d say. Anyway, I don’t understand his intentions. He seemed nice enough, a bit odd maybe. But not like some deviant.” I realized after I said it that this was not perhaps the best word to use with the two men. However, they did not seem to notice. “What should I do? What could he want with me?”

“I don’t know, but meet with him again, and keep an open mind,” Hartley said.

It was two days later when Mr. Preston came to see me again. This time he brought a small bouquet of yellow roses. After some conversation, I learned he was twenty-nine, had graduated from Harvard with a degree in literature, and now spent his days living alone in his home, sometimes writing poetry. Apparently, as I had guessed, he had no need for a job. Why such a man was still unmarried, I found puzzling, although I supposed it could be his awkward socializing. When I mentioned that I was sixteen, he seemed a bit surprised, but did not lose interest. Then again, if he had not lost interest at the sight of my pregnancy, what would a thirteen year age difference do?

“The father is not around?” he asked after inquiring as to how far along my pregnancy was.

“No,” I said.

We were walking around the fairground. Mr. Preston was quite lanky. He seemed to be at least half a foot taller than me, and when he walked I was reminded of giraffes I had seen when we passed by a larger circus once. He had a bit of a stutter, but his face was nice and his eyes were a clear blue.

“I cannot understand it,” he said. “I have always wanted a wife and children, and how another man can- can leave his, I find quite troubling. Now I find myself growing older and without a family... well, it just seems unfair to me. But I suppose I have been too involved in my writing to make the effort needed to- to secure such a thing from happening.”

“He doesn’t know about the baby,” I said. I paused, thinking for a moment. “It is slightly sad, isn’t it? I hadn’t been planning on any of this happening so soon, and you...”

“I hope I’m not being too forward,” Mr. Preston said, “but I find you very beautiful and for- forgive me, but this man made a very foolish mistake. I would say that he is a very stupid man, in fact, and not worthy of you.”

I was silent. Of course, in some ways I agreed with him. I thought these things a hundred times over every moment of the day, even in my sleep. Yet my love for Nicu was still stronger than all of that and I now thought of him in the moonlight, his breath against my cheek.

“If you were mine,” he went on, “I would never leave you. How can you leave an angel?”

I smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Preston, but you praise me too much.”

“Please, call me James.”

James Preston visited me often in that next week. The circus people were talking even more now. Mama Dobre stared at me with such contempt that it nearly broke me inside. Alfred asked if James had tried anything, but I said no, he was a gentleman; we just talked about various things, mostly his writing and his family, who lived in Rhode Island in a big mansion. Hartley asked when he was going to propose.

In fact, James proposed to me not long after that.

“I- I know this is unusual,” he started, “and I have been thinking about it for a long time. Quite honestly, your being pregnant is a dilemma, but I have thought it through and I think I have a solution. I have informed my family of my intention to- to marry you, but I admit I have told a bit of a lie. I told them that your husband had died suddenly of diphtheria and left your unborn child without a father. Now, I admit they are

still not too pleased about the situation, however I stick by my decision. I'm wild about you, Philippa. I knew- I knew as soon as I saw you walking across that tightrope, I thought, that is my girl, that's her. If you will have me, I will make you very happy. You won't have to live in these conditions or work anymore; I will always provide for you and your child." He took a breath. "How does it sound? Will you be so gracious as to be my wife?"

"Yes," I said.

My last day at the circus, I said goodbye to Mama Dobre and her daughters. It was a brief and cold parting. I yearned to tell Mama that the being inside of me that she loathed so much was her own grandchild, but of course I did not. Hartley and Alfred, on the other hand, wrapped me up in their warm embraces.

"Goodbye, sweetheart," Hartley said. "You're doing the right thing."

Even Alfred agreed. "You'll be happy now." Then he whispered in my ear, "Forget about Nicu, that ninny."

I hugged him tightly.

Next I went to Oscar's office, carrying my suitcases. He was hunched over at his desk, reading some papers.

"I'm leaving now," I said, standing in the doorway.

He looked up, sighed a little, and walked towards me. "Guess we won't be seeing you again."

"Probably not."

“You’re relinquishing my name now, huh?” Oscar said, putting a hand on my arm.

My situation was not ideal. I did not love James and I wasn’t sure that I ever would. I still hoped that one day Nicu would come back to me. But my baby would not be abandoned like I was. They would belong in the house they lived in, the family they were born into. If they had olive skin and black hair like their father, I would tell them it was only because they were someone special. They would never feel alone. I would make sure of it.

James was waiting for me at his car. Before getting in, I looked back at the line of caravans, the big top, and the mess hall. Some lingering circus people who were outside waved me final goodbyes. A breeze tugged at my dress as I got into the car. I made myself comfortable in the seat, glancing over at James, his long thin fingers lightly tapping the wheel. As we drove off, I closed my eyes, knowing when I opened them again, everything would be new.