

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a dark blue athletic top and black leggings, is shown in profile from the side. She is performing a rope climb on a thick, dark rope against a textured, light-colored wall. Her body is arched, and she is holding the rope with both hands and feet. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her muscles and the texture of the rope and wall.

Monique  
Polak

LEARNING  
THE ROPES



LEARNING  
THE ROPES

Monique Polak

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS



*For Lauren Abrams,  
the performer in our family, with love*

# One

**A** pile of suitcases blocks my way to the check-in counter.

“Some people!” a woman in front of me mutters—loud enough for the couple who have left their suitcases in our way to hear. The woman tugs on her little boy’s hand and leads him around the suitcases. They duck under the cord (it’s easy for the boy, but the woman groans) and get back in line.

I don’t mind the suitcases. For me, they’re something to play with.

I toss my backpack over them. It lands with a small thud on the other side. I plant the heel of my hand on the top suitcase, nice and steady. Then I get a little bounce going in my knees,

and I flip into a handstand. Which takes me right over the suitcases.

The boy's mouth falls open.

He giggles when I turn to him and take a bow.

Mom has ducked under the cord. "That's my girl, always putting on a show," she says to no one in particular, but not unkindly.

Dad hasn't come to Vancouver International Airport to see me off. He's against my going to circus camp in Montreal. He's against all things circus. *You could get hurt, Mandy, and you know it. Accidents happen. Think about what happened to your grandpa. Are you even listening, Mandy?*

Mom's the one paying for circus camp, not to mention airfare and my room and board. She says a person needs to follow her dreams, even if there's a risk involved. Something tells me Mom's dream wasn't to do the billing for Dad's engineering company.

When I'm done checking in, I can feel Mom giving me a final look-over. I'm wearing my usual—comfortable jeans and a soft, black T-shirt. "You're looking at me like I'm a package you're about to put in the mail," I tell Mom.

She gives me a fierce hug. “A precious package,” she whispers. “Text me as soon as you land.”

Two weeks will be the longest I’ve ever been away from home.

“Thanks, Mom. For everything.”

“Don’t be angry at your dad,” she says into my ear. “You know how hard this is for him.”

The hug ends, and we’re trying not to cry. Then we both gulp at the same time, which makes us laugh.

Mom rests her hand on my shoulder. “Get outta here, will ya?”

\* \* \*

I’m too excited to pay attention as the flight attendant explains the emergency exits. In about six hours, I, Mandy Campbell, will be at the Montreal Circus College’s Summer Circus Camp. *Each year, only twenty-five teenagers from around the world are accepted into this prestigious program.* If that sounds like an ad, it’s because I memorized it from the brochure.

I need to stand out at circus camp. If I do, it’ll improve my chances of being accepted into the

Montreal Circus College. If I make it into MCC and stand out there, chances are good I'll get a job with a real circus, maybe even Cirque de la Lune, the greatest, most famous circus ever.

Somewhere over the Rocky Mountains, I doze off. I dream I'm climbing the old oak tree in our backyard in North Vancouver. My arms and legs work together like an engine, propelling me up the trunk. When I reach the top, all I can see is blue sky—and the window to the attic, where my dad's home office is. The screen is open to let in the fresh air. Dad is hunched over his computer. "Daddy!" I call. "Look at me!" But he won't look up.

"Are you all right, dear?" the woman sitting next to me asks. I can feel her staring at my legs. I've fallen asleep with them up in the air, resting on the back of the seat in front of me.

"I'm fine. Thanks." I lower my legs, crossing them at the ankle the way my seat partner probably expects me to.

The flight attendant comes rattling down the aisle with the beverages cart. I'm reaching for my soda water when I notice a dark-haired girl in the window seat across the aisle. She's fallen asleep too.

Her legs are crossed in her lap, and her head has dropped so low it nearly skims the floor.

She's either some kind of double-jointed yogi or she's headed for circus camp too.

\* \* \*

When I exit through the glass doors of Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, I spot a small woman with blond hair holding up a sign that says *MCC Summer Circus Camp*. The girl from the airplane is behind me, and we're both waving to the woman with the sign.

The woman's name is Suzanne. I'd guess from her muscular build that she's done circus too. "Mandy? Genevieve?" she says, looking from one of us to the other as if she is trying to figure out who's who. "Welcome to Montreal. Have you two already met?"

Genevieve is from Seattle. She's wearing a hot-pink crop-top and skintight yoga pants, not to mention way too much makeup for a plane ride. Her black eyeliner sweeps up at the outer corners of her eyes, and she must have on three coats of pink lip gloss.

I get a small pang in my chest when Genevieve tells me she's an aerialist too. I could use a friend—so what if she wears too much makeup and I don't touch the stuff?—but I also know how competitive circus camp is going to be. There will probably only be a spot at the Montreal Circus College for one star aerialist. And it had better be me.

Genevieve flips her long dark hair back. “I do tissu,” she says.

Most girls who are aerialists do tissu, the circus term for aerial fabric.

For a second, Genevieve's eyes stay on my jeans. I can feel her judging me. “I climb rope,” I tell her. If my hair were long enough, I'd flip it the way she keeps flipping hers. I can't help feeling superior. Sure, tissu is pretty and feminine—like Genevieve—but it's a cliché in the circus world.

Rope is so much cooler.