

SARAH ARMSTRONG

# BIG MAGIC



Hardie Grant

CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING



*For Amelia*

## PROLOGUE

The day my mother disappears, the sky is the most dazzling blue I've ever seen it. Our circus has just arrived in Millimba, and our convoy of trucks chugs down the wide main street, making sure everyone knows we're in town.

Dad and I sit up high in the front truck. Cartwheeling down the road ahead of us is my best friend, Kit. His arms and legs trace great circles through the air before he presses up into a handstand and flick-flacks along as if he has springs in his hands. Today, he's wearing his favourite luminescent blue tights and singlet, and he beams at the townsfolk who watch from the footpaths.

Our clown Jerry zigzags about on his unicycle, squirting a water pistol at the crowd, while my uncle

Vincent – the circus ringmaster – strides along in his shiny black top hat, arms flung wide, shouting an invitation to our show. We need a big crowd tonight. The big top's been less than half full for weeks.

I've always liked Millimba, with its sprouting palm trees and noisy, chattering rainbow lorikeets. Our circus comes here for three weeks every January and we set up at the showground, in the shade of the giant fig trees. They have smooth grey bark and roots that bunch up above the ground, like strange curved elephants' trunks. When it's almost dark or just light, the roots look like prehistoric animals crouched under the trees. I don't need Mum to tell me that those trees hold serious amounts of big magic.

*Life is good*, I think as Dad turns our truck off the main street towards the showground. Things have been tense lately, with all the talk about not making enough money and everyone missing Mr Potts. But today, everything seems to radiate hope: the hot sun shining down on us from that glittering, impossibly blue sky; the green pointy mountains in the distance; the townies clapping and laughing on the side of the road; even the half-eaten bag of jelly snakes on the seat between me and Dad. Life seems so rosy, without even the tiniest hint of how badly this day will end.

## CHAPTER 1

‘Good evening ...’ Mum’s voice booms from the big top speakers. ‘My daughter, Tulsi, will climb into this box, and before your very eyes ... I will saw her in half!’

A few nervous laughs come from the audience as Mum waves her hand over the wooden Dad-made box, which unfortunately ended up looking a little too much like a coffin.

I unzip my boots and smile out at the audience in their rising tiers of seats. There are only thirty people here – a few local families and a handful of hippies down from the hills – but Mum and I will still give our performance one hundred per cent. Because this is our act; it’s what we do together every single evening.

Mum helps me up the ladder and gives me a friendly wink. The music swells as I lie face-down in the box. I don't stretch my legs out like the audience imagines. Instead, I tuck my knees up under me, into a secret compartment, and poke my head out the hole at one end. At the other end of the box, Kit's been hiding in his own secret compartment, on his front, bent in half, head down. He's been there since the start of the act, when the box was wheeled out. Any moment now, he will stick his feet out the hole at his end of the box, and everyone will think they're my feet. We're wearing matching red socks and he'll wiggle his toes while I turn to smile at the audience.

This sawing-in-half trick is not big magic. It's little magic, a trick that ordinary, everyday magicians do; something you could learn from a book. Mum does tricks like this *and* big magic. Not that the audience can tell the difference. They want to believe in *any* magic, according to Mum. They want to see something they cannot explain; they long to know that the impossible is, in fact, possible.

Mum taps on the box with her wand, as if she's a fairy godmother or something, and lowers the spinning circular saw. Woodchips spit and fly, and the box vibrates around me.

After a minute, she lifts the saw clear. I smile and waggle my eyebrows at the audience as she brushes

a few flecks of sawdust from her old, shimmery blue suit – the one she and I just finished repairing, sewing new sequins on for what must be the tenth time. From under her blue satin top hat, her long hair falls like a gleaming black curtain.

The audience claps loudly as Dad helps Mum pull apart the two ends of the box, to show that the box (and, supposedly, me) is in two parts. Dad looks like I imagine the Vikings did, with his blond beard and ponytail and huge, strong hands. He's the tent boss, in charge of putting up the big top, and also our Mr Fix-it, mending everything from truck engines and generators to bikes and the ice-cream machine.

Dad and Fatima, our stagehand, wheel the two halves of the box backstage as Mum pulls a bunch of fresh roses from the handbag of a woman in the front row. *That's* big magic. She uses a spell to transform a leafy twig into flowers. The audience roars with delight as Mum hands the roses to the astonished woman.

Watching her do big magic, I feel both thrilled and miserable – but mostly miserable. The extraordinary magic that runs in her veins also runs in mine; it's a gift, handed down by generation after generation of women magicians. But my mother refuses to teach me how to do big magic. She reckons there's some law of magic that says I must be sixteen before I can

learn even the most basic thing – and that’s still five years away.

Backstage, behind the faded red velvet curtains, Kit and I climb out of the box and peel off our red socks. Kit smiles. ‘I still think you smile just a *little* too much for someone who’s supposedly been cut in half.’

It’s true, I can’t help grinning. Straight after the sawing trick, I always feel weirdly happy, as if we’ve cheated death. ‘Well, I noticed your big shiny smile for the audience when you had that fall from the highwire last week,’ I say. ‘It’s as if you were absolutely *delighted* to be falling.’

He laughs and gives me a friendly poke. ‘No! I was hoping my dazzling smile would distract them from my stupid mistake!’

Kit is pretty much the opposite of me. He is shy with strangers and I am not. He’s tall and super muscly for twelve, with a long face and short black hair. I am small, with pale skin and brown hair that’s often in plaits (the best hairdo for hiding knots).

Beside us, Kit’s mum, Li Lin, is stretching one leg up until it points straight to the roof, her knee up near the top of her head. She’s an acrobat and contortionist (she can tie herself in an actual knot), plus she runs the food van. As she warms up, she hums, ‘You are my sunshine’. Kit’s dad – who was



also an acrobat – used to sing that song while he warmed up.

‘No aerial hoop act tonight, Kit,’ says Li Lin, lowering her leg.

He frowns. ‘Broken hoop, again?’

She nods and folds forward until her face is pressed to her knees.

Kit rolls his eyes at me. Every show, it seems, something needs fixing. Poor Dad can’t keep up.

Kit and I peek through holes in the velvet curtain. Mum’s still walking along the front row, using a spell to transform everyday things from people’s pockets, like the pencil she turns into a sunflower.

We watch closely, as if we haven’t seen her do it a hundred times. It’s still awesome, to be honest, every single time. She takes a folded white hanky from a man, shakes it, and there, perched on her finger, is a plump white dove. It flutters up to sit on a wire, high in the roof of the big top.

‘Wow, she’s amazing,’ breathes Kit, and I feel more miserable than ever. Five long years until I can learn that.

Vincent appears beside me, top hat in hand, and gently tweaks my earlobe. ‘You did good, Tuls.’ Vince is my mum’s brother, and one of my favourite people in the world. He smells of clove chewing gum and the orange-scented wax he puts on his

twirly moustache. When I was younger, he'd let me ride around on his shoulders for hours at a time.

He passes me a small handful of pistachio nuts before leaning forward to peer through the curtain with a frown. He's trying not to show it, but I know how worried he is about our small audiences lately.

This circus is the only home I've known. I was born right here in the big top after a show one evening – Dad caught me and wrapped me in Mum's velvet cape – and all these people are more than just fellow performers. They have babysat me, fed me and helped homeschool me and Kit; but, more importantly, together we make this wonderful, joy-filled thing – this circus show, this unique-each-night gift for the audience. It takes hours, no, *years* of practice to make it look effortless and smooth, but nothing beats the feeling of a full-house audience rising to its feet, cheering and clapping.

'Yes!' exclaims Vince. Mum has just turned a handful of sawdust into glittery golden confetti, which she tosses into the air with a dramatic gesture.

I want to know the words of that spell. Of every spell! All I want is for her to let me in to the world of magic.

Mum doesn't know it, but for the past few weeks I've been secretly practising a couple of spells I've

heard her use. This afternoon, I'm pretty sure I made the door of our van swing a few centimetres. My plan is to keep practising, then choose the right moment to show her and prove that I'm ready to learn big magic.

The scattered audience rises to its feet, clapping and whistling, as Mum bursts back through the curtain, smiling. Jerry strides into the ring, twirling his fire sticks. The lights go down, except for a spotlight on Jerry and another on Claudie, who's playing spooky violin music. Later, after the trapeze and highwire acts, and after Zanni's dogs perform, all of us take a final bow and the audience trickles out.

Backstage, Mum and I pack her props into a red wooden box. She passes me her wand. Up close, it's just a stick of bamboo that's been wrapped in black velvet tape she bought at some newsagency. It's her fingers that send the magic.

'Mum?' I say quietly as I slot the wand into the box. 'Remind me why you were taught magic before you were sixteen, given that it's against the rules.'

She raises one eyebrow and says, 'This again? Teaching me too young was just one of my mother's many bad decisions.'

'And what was so bad about it?'

She shakes her head and shrugs off her sequined jacket. Mum and Vince hate it when I ask anything

about their mother, and I know there are things they're not telling me. At Christmas one year, I tried asking Mum's aunt Thelma a few questions, but she dodged them too.

'But big magic is in my blood,' I say. 'Surely the circus needs me to learn magic now more than ever!'

Mum puts a finger to her lips and glances around. Big magic is our secret. Of course, Dad is in on it, and Vincent knows because he grew up with magic, but he never talks about it. And I've told Kit too; how could I not? Otherwise, we must keep it quiet. And it's actually not too hard, because no-one ever asks a magician how they do a trick. Even ordinary magicians have strict codes of secrecy – and of all people, circus folk know to respect that.

'Yes, you're right,' she says quietly. 'It's your destiny. But *not yet*. Get changed, sweetie.' She's in a hurry. I know she wants to go off on her own to practise some mysterious big-magic trick that she's been working on since last week; something to draw big crowds.

As I unbutton my jumpsuit, Zanni appears at Mum's side. 'Merry?' Her eyes are wide with worry. 'There's someone here to talk to you. He says his name is Peter Potts.'

Mum's face falls. 'Oh no.'

A tall, bald man in a suit strides through the side flap of the tent. ‘Hello, Merry,’ he says loudly. ‘I want a meeting in the ring, now. With everyone. Round them up, would you?’

Mum nods. ‘Okay.’ Her lips are pressed tight.

‘Who’s that?’ I whisper as the man pushes his way through the curtains.

She closes the lid of her props box. ‘That’s Mr Potts’s son.’ Mr Potts, lovely Mr Potts, who owned our circus for decades, died three months ago. I never even knew he had a son. ‘Peter Potts owns the circus now,’ Mum says, ‘and he rang Vince last week to check how much the circus is earning.’

‘So why’s he here?’

She meets my eyes. ‘I think he wants to close us down.’