



THE
WEIGHT
OF
AIR

A NOVEL

KIMBERLY DUFFY

THE
WEIGHT
OF
AIR

Books by Kimberly Duffy

A Mosaic of Wings

A Tapestry of Light

Every Word Unsaid

The Weight of Air



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OF
AIR

KIMBERLY DUFFY



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* * *

To August, my sweet boy.
May you always remain rooted in God's Word
and remember what true strength is.
You only need to look as far as your father.

* * *

PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER 1891
OUTSIDE TOULOUSE, FRANCE



“YOU ARE SURE you don’t want me to go with you to the station?” Bram asked.

Polly MacGinnis turned away from the tent being raised, its white canvas roof puffing and sinking like a deflated cheese soufflé, to look at her husband. “No, that isn’t necessary. You are needed here. There is a show in a few hours. Let’s not make Giuseppe even angrier than he already is.”

Bram lifted his cap and scrubbed his hand through unruly brown hair. She’d offered to trim it before she left, but he said the extra length made him look wild. It was good for the act. “Must you leave? It’s a long journey on your own.”

“I can manage.” She twirled her fingers through the air with a flourish and grinned, though he likely saw through it. “After all, I manage the trapeze and rope on my own.”

“Yes, but Polly . . .” He stared down at her with those warm eyes she’d fallen in love with, and for a moment, just one insignificant beat of time, she thought he might see what she

used to be. Who she used to be. “What about the melancholia? If it descends, you will be alone.”

She pinched her lips together and moved away from him. “I will be with my mother.”

He followed her, his long stride easily eating the distance between them. At least physically. Nothing could bridge the divide created when she had brought their daughter into the world and nearly died.

“I want to say good-bye to Mabel. Where is she?” Polly spoke with brisk efficiency. There was no use dragging out the argument any longer. She would go to New York City to visit her mother, who would likely not survive another winter. Polly had been supporting her for a decade and wouldn’t stop now just because Giuseppe Manzo needed his best aerialist to finish the season. Just because her husband thought her as fragile as spun glass.

“Where do you think she is?” Bram’s words were gilded in proud amusement.

They headed for the menagerie, where Mabel would be found helping settle the animals. At only eight, their daughter towered over other children her age, but there wasn’t anywhere a girl as willing or gentle. She had a tender heart.

Bram’s fingers brushed Polly’s arm as he guided her around a trio of clowns, and her spine tingled the way it always did—always had—with his touch.

Ahead, Mabel carried a crate above her head, and the Manzo Brothers Circus’s prized Asian elephant, Meena, trailed after, attached to her waist by a rope.

“Darling, I’m leaving,” Polly called, her words breaking in a way that drew Bram’s concerned glance.

He swept the box, full of yammering monkeys, from Mabel’s hands as easily as one would lift a dropped handkerchief. Bram MacGinnis, the great strongman, knew nothing about constantly trying to prove himself strong and capable.

Mabel turned with an enthusiastic shriek as the box left her grasp. She launched herself at Bram, flinging her arms around his waist, and craned her head back to look up at him. Meena snuffled and swung her trunk against the packed dirt, and Bram laughed as he set down the crate and worked open the knot at Mabel's waist. He tossed the rope to a passing bullman, who led the elephant away.

"Your mother is leaving," he said and chucked Mabel beneath the chin.

Mabel turned and blinked up at Polly, then approached softly, as though afraid to spook her. No gleeful abandon or affectionate displays. Only respectful deference. It grated against Polly's heart. Seared her chest until she thought she could spit fire like Luko, the flame-eater.

Her own relationship with her mother had been pocked by distance. Grief and overwork made any sort of closeness impossible. Polly had vowed to be different with her children.

But for the three days of labor that left her without even the energy to gasp. But for the months of recovery. The dark shadows that filled her mind and blunted the edges of her affection. The inability to nurse and the height that made it clear Mabel would no longer be able to train with Polly. Instead she moved to join Bram in an act that knit them together even tighter.

"You are going now, Maman?" Mabel spoke with too much restraint, and Polly wrapped her arms around her child in an uncharacteristic hug.

"I am, and I shall miss you soundly."

Surprise flickered in her daughter's serious gaze. Delight chased it. "Da said you must cross an ocean. Are you very scared?"

"Only a little bit."

Mabel tugged her lower lip between her small square teeth, then reached into her sleeve. She withdrew Isabella, the little French doll sent from America by Polly's mother.

“You told me Grandmother crossed the ocean when she left France for America.” Mabel’s gaze sparked with pleasure as she made the connection. “And now you shall cross from France to America with Isabella in the same way.”

“Oh, but you must keep her. Grandmother sent her to you. She doesn’t need her back.”

Mabel reached for Polly’s arm—not up or down, for they stood the same height—and tucked Isabella into the cuff at her wrist. “For courage,” she said the way Polly always did before a show when Mabel shivered with nerves. “Isabella will be with you all the way.”

Polly caressed the doll’s tiny feet hanging from her sleeve. “I shall bring her back to you, and we will tell you all about our adventures in the United States. Be strong, Mabel, in all things you set your hands and heart and eyes toward.”

Mabel gave a grave nod and leaned forward to kiss Polly’s cheek. “Good-bye, Maman. Da says you will surely be back before winter ends, so I will see you in Bologna.”

Bologna, Italy, where the Manzo Brothers Circus wintered. Rested. Recovered.

Polly met Bram’s gaze. “I do not expect Mother will live much longer. A cough has settled in her chest, and she says the doctor doesn’t have much hope for her recovery.”

“I’m sorry for it.”

“You don’t have to accompany me out. My trunk has already been put on a wagon, and a driver has been pulled from the chaos.” She waved her hand in a wide arc, encompassing all the activity around them.

He stepped near. “You will miss this?”

“I will. But it will be good to be back in New York. For a little while, at least.”

“Will you visit Travis and Wells?” He tried to hide it, but distrust still lingered in those words. He knew of her *affaire de coeur* with her old circus owner’s son. It was only two years

after it ended that she had met Bram, so her heart had pricked when she decided to love the Scottish giant with his hearty laugh and broad shoulders. And he had seen. Had weaseled some of the story out of her. But not all of it. Most of Paul remained tucked beneath the layers of grit and agony girding her peace. Only her old friends Rowena and Robert remembered. Only they knew of the ring still hidden in the bottom of her trunk.

“I see no reason to.”

“They were your family once.”

“I have a family.”

He swallowed, then dropped to his knees, and she went into the circle of his arms. He hadn't hugged her like this in years, always afraid it would lead to something more. Afraid the passion that had flamed between them when Travis and Wells Circus toured Europe, joining for one day with Manzo Brothers, would consume him and destroy her. And that couldn't happen. The doctor had told her after Mabel's birth that another child would kill her.

“I have the strength of a thousand men,” he'd told her one night when she cried for his touch, *“but I cannot resist you. It is best if I keep my distance.”*

He pressed his nose into the hollow of her clavicle and inhaled. “You should stay. I have an aching fear that you will never come back.”

Polly cupped his face. “You and your Scottish superstitions. I will be back.”

“And if you fall into the melancholy again? If you grow ill?”

“I am perfectly healthy. And I've not felt such things in years.” She looked away, not wanting him to see the lie in her expression. *Months*, perhaps, contained more truth. But she had experience in hiding them.

She leaned into his embrace again. It was where she'd always felt safest. And it had been too long.

With a gruff clearing of his throat, Bram released her and stood. He swung Mabel into his arms. “Say good-bye to your ma. For now?” He glanced at Polly.

“For now.”

“Good-bye, Maman.”

Polly smiled her farewell, unable to speak past her tightening throat.

She turned to leave, but not before she saw Bram hold Mabel straight out. “High?” he asked. She giggled. “Higher?” She nodded.

He tossed her into the air, stepping back to allow her a double flip—a trick left over from those few years she’d trained in acrobatics with Polly—and a soft landing.

CHAPTER
1

MARCH 1911
TRIESTE, AUSTRIA-HUNGARY



INSTEAD OF LIFTING HER FATHER, Mabel MacGinnis found herself standing in the middle of the ring two months after his death, staring at a clown.

“You remember how to do this?” she asked, not quite believing it. Lorenzo, when not painted white and wearing his jester-inspired costume, typically spent his idle time flirting and writing sloppy love poems. “You must remain stiff.”

“I know, *Piccolo*.” He shuffled toward her, his exaggerated movements drawing laughter from the house. At the sound of her longtime nickname—never once having been little in any way—the tension drained from Mabel’s shoulders. Lorenzo lifted his arms above his head, palms clapped together and his mouth and eyes making wide circles. “I can do this. *You* can do this.”

Lorenzo weighed much less than Da, whom, at six feet four and 230 pounds, Mabel was able to overhead lift by the time she reached twenty-three. This was not her hardest trick. There was no reason she couldn't do it. No reason she couldn't astound the audience, who had come to watch her at Manzo Brothers Circus, by lifting a clown over her head. Only a clown.

Not a wooden dowel supporting the weight of three aerialists, which was her best-received trick three years earlier. Not standing on a towering dais and completing a 2,800-pound harness lift. Not lifting Bram MacGinnis, Giant of Scotland.

It was only Lorenzo the clown.

But when he brought his fingers to his teeth in a pantomime of fear, then crossed his arms as though shivering but really giving her a solid anchor with which to hoist him, the swirl of grief she'd been stumbling through since Da died evaporated, leaving only uncertainty. And fear. And the knowledge that the world's strongest woman was nothing without the world's strongest man by her side.

"Do it for your papa." Lorenzo's lilting Italian yanked Mabel from her thoughts. "Now. They grow weary."

Mabel glanced around the tent and saw it was true. People had begun to shift and murmur. Death for a show.

She crouched and slung Lorenzo over her shoulders like they had practiced. He allowed himself to be handled like a sack of potatoes without even a grunt. Bracing her palms against his bicep—a much smaller one than she was used to—and knee, she pushed from her middle and lifted.

For Da.

For everything they had been and done.

For the strength that was the MacGinnis heritage.

The crowd began to chant. "Bram! Bram! Bram!"

They didn't know. Mabel had asked Giuseppe to tell no one. Not until she had grieved privately and felt strong enough

to face the reporters. But she saw now that had been foolish, because with every shout of his name, her resolve further weakened. Her arms began to tremble. Then her knees. Then her entire body. Shaking from the weight of carrying more than a clown on her shoulders.

Oh, Da. She couldn't do it. Not without him.

Lorenzo tumbled to the ground behind her. A solid thump. A grunt. A hiss of breath.

The entire tent went silent.

Mabel whirled and dropped into a crouch. "Oh, Lorenzo, I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

He grinned and waved one hand at the crowd, then jumped to his feet. But she saw him wince. His lips whitened as he held his arm to his stomach.

"You're hurt," she whispered, shock making her voice a wispy thing.

"I will be fine, *Piccolo*." He jerked his chin toward the jumble of steel bars she was meant to bend into rings and juggle. "Finish the act."

She watched him limp away, the tip of his felt hat crushed and one arm cradled in the other. A delirious little giggle bubbled from her lips. She'd just dropped someone. Someone who weighed less than she did.

Alyona Popov, her graceful feet balanced against the back of a dun *Donskaya*, galloped into the ring like an avenging angel. She did a flip, swung low to grab one of the bars, and spiraled back to her feet.

With a gentle toss, the bar flew toward Mabel, and she caught it by rote.

"Finish the show," Alyona called, her words nearly lost to the pounding of hooves and buzz of spectators. "Fall apart later."

Mabel shook her head to clear the remnants of guilt and failure, then focused on one person in the audience—a child of about six, thumb stuck in his mouth. She had always before

done everything for Da. Every trick, every feat, every lift. But today, she would do it for that boy.

It would have to be enough.

She twisted metal into rings, spinning them into the air and catching them, one by one, around her arm. But there was no applause when she finished her act.

Maybe because it had been Da holding *her* up all along.

Once Mabel was backstage and the crowd's attention had been snagged by a couple of wire dancers, she found herself surrounded not by fury but by friends.

Even Lorenzo, whose wrapped wrist attested to something a sight more serious than broken pride, offered her a sheepish smile. "It will heal, but I fear my career in strength is over."

Alyona gripped Mabel's arms, maternal despite the fact that she only came to Mabel's midsection. "You are all right?"

"I'm fine. It's Lorenzo who was hurt."

"No, no," Lorenzo said, "I can now claim to have been broken by the world's strongest woman. It is an honor I will proudly wear."

Despite herself, Mabel laughed.

It was interrupted by an incredulous shout. "Mabel!" Giuseppe Manzo, owner of Manzo Brothers Circus and the only Manzo brother who actually existed, broke up the gathering. The others, with sympathetic glances tossed her way, scattered. "What was that?"

"I told you it was too soon, Giuseppe. I need more time."

"It has been months! The show must go on. You know this. And you are our only strongperson now that your father has gone and died."

Gone and died. As though Da decided to stop his heart purely to inconvenience Giuseppe's ambitions. "*The worst sort of disservice,*" he'd said. Of course, the circus owner was prone to hyperbole. It was what made him an excellent impresario.

"I understand. I just . . . choked."

"You are not allowed to choke in the ring. You practiced this. Over and over for days."

"I know. I'm sorry." Mabel glanced Lorenzo's way, and her chest tightened. She had never before hurt anyone but herself during an act. "It won't happen again." She hoped.

"Make sure it doesn't. You have been with Manzo Brothers a long time."

"Since I was born." It was her home. A constantly shifting, moving, traveling one, but all she'd ever known.

"People come to see the strongest woman in the world. That woman does not drop skinny clowns. I don't want to lose you, but if you fail another act, I will have no choice."

Mabel went still. Even her breath paused in its journey out of her lungs. "Giuseppe, you can't mean that. What would I do? Where would I go?"

"What else can I do, Mabel?" He threw his hands up, and his drama failed to amuse her. "Six shows. Three days. That is all I can give you. Figure out a way to go on without your father, or you're done."

When he left, she found herself entirely surrounded again.

"Where is Jake?" she asked, allowing herself to be patted and hugged.

"I saw him in the backyard behind wardrobe before we went on." Lorenzo waved over his shoulder. "Practicing."

Once she ducked away from the circle of comfort, it took only minutes to find him. Most of the performers were in the ring or backstage, but Jake Cunningham never stuck around once his acrobatic act ended. Unlike the rest of them, he hated the circus. Mabel assumed he only stayed because he didn't want to return to the United States, where his wife had died in a stunt gone wrong.

She watched him for a few minutes. He was as nimble as a cheetah. As beautiful too.

He flipped into the air from standing, his gaze catching hers as he stuck the landing. “Hello.” His brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“I dropped Lorenzo.”

Jake smacked his hands against his pants and approached. “Is he all right?”

She nodded.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded. Then shook her head. Then covered her face with her hands. “I couldn’t do it. I just went weak all over.”

“You’ve been through a lot. Give yourself time.”

“I don’t have time, Jake. I have six shows. I can’t hang around like 190 pounds of dead weight.”

His hand found her shoulder and squeezed. “I know you can do this. Everyone knows you can do this.” His gaze ricocheted over the dusty area, landing on the wardrobe tent, a turned-over cart, and a clutter of discarded items that would likely not make it to the next city. “Here.” He darted toward the pile of junk and rolled out a wheelbarrow ringed with rusting hoops. Setting it on end, he dropped to his knees and braced his elbow against the lid. “Arm-wrestle?” He wiggled his fingers, drawing her across the packed dirt.

Pebbles bit through her tights and nicked her knees as she sank to the ground. She settled her forearm against his, noting their equal size. Flipping around a trapeze and walking on his hands had made Jake strong. But not as strong as her. “You never win.”

Not from the moment they’d met—when Da had called for someone to compete in a wrestling match with his daughter. The winner would be given a hundred marks. Jake hadn’t eaten in days. He’d been wandering around Germany for weeks, doing odd jobs to support himself, and only wanted a meal.

He ended up with a bruised backside and a job.

“You never know,” Jake said. “You’ll give me a hundred marks if I do?”

“Sure.” They gripped hands, both rough and calloused from their work.

Mabel let him push back. Just a little. Just enough to release the dimples that had every woman in the circus madly in love with him.

And then she twisted her grip and slammed his arm into the wood.

“Aw, I was so close.” He rubbed his wrist.

Mabel raised her brows. “You weren’t.”

“You feel better, though?”

“I do.”

“Then I won.” He grinned, and she couldn’t help but answer him back in kind.

There was no one else she’d rather talk to after failure. No one else who understood the pain of smiling through loss. Jake had years of experience pretending the hurt away, and the crowds never noticed the brokenness beneath the tricks and costumes and sparkle.

“I’m grateful to you, Jake.” She had been since he’d joined her on that platform, his eyes widening when he realized the strongman’s daughter wasn’t like any other woman he’d ever known. He’d gone on to become as close to her father as a son. As close to her as a brother.

“Good. I’m not going anywhere.” His eyes danced, and he chuckled. “Except for France, Germany, Italy, Bosnia, and wherever else Giuseppe Manzo decides to take us.”

He stood and bent to kiss her head, and she wished they were something less like siblings.



The doll looked nothing like Isabella, her childhood toy, except for having two arms and two legs. It was large, for

one—at least four times the size. And it wore rough homespun the color of October leaves instead of a fancy satin gown and leather slippers. It drew first Mabel's gaze and then her fingers.

She glanced around the performance tent, but no one was around except a handful of men preparing to break everything down before the circus headed to their next destination. Zagreb, she thought.

The doll's cotton dress was torn, its apron dirty. It only had one button eye. The other had been torn away, a few loose threads poking up from the socket like a nightmarish apparition. It had been well loved. How sad to be separated from its owner.

Mabel's thoughts shifted to Isabella, long lost to America. A pang traveled the circumference of her heart, and she wished, for only a moment, that she hadn't given the doll to her mother before she left. But that was awful. Who knew what Maman had faced in her last days? Isabella might have brought her comfort.

Be strong in all you set your hands and heart and eyes toward. Maman's constant refrain tiptoed into Mabel's spirit like the sun in May—a gentle reminder.

She tucked the doll beneath her arm and headed outside. The grass, trampled by a thousand feet, was littered with food wrappers and discarded tickets, and a few straggling towners loitered, hoping for a final glimpse of the made-up clowns or one of the scantily dressed aerialists.

Theirs was a morally sound show, though, and the moment a female performer left the ring, she slipped into a skirt and shirtwaist. Bare legs were free only to prevent tragedy. They weren't meant to titillate.

Wanting to avoid attention, Mabel ducked her head as she passed a throng of men outside the sideshow entrance. She'd learned to make herself as small as possible when not per-

forming. Otherwise she became a target for questions and unwanted advances.

Everyone wanted to meet and touch the giantess. No one cared enough to *know* her, though.

She huffed a sigh as she slipped backyard, where spectators were barred from entering, and, after briefly ducking into one of the tents, made her way toward the line of wagons meant to transport them to the station. Trying to avoid meeting anyone's gaze after her disastrous show, she slid onto an empty bench and fixed her attention on the doll in her lap. A little girl would go to bed bereft of her companion tonight.

As the wagon bumped over the uneven ground, Mabel withdrew the sewing kit she'd pilfered from wardrobe out of her pocket and removed the scissors to trim the grisly looking threads.

"What do you have there?"

Mabel jerked and realized she wasn't alone. Giulia and Imilia, Giuseppe Manzo's daughters, sat beside her. She held up the doll. "I found it discarded in the big top. Looks like it needs a bit of tenderness and care."

"We don't think she is the only one." This from Giulia, who, a few inches taller than her twin and possessing a stronger personality, often took it upon herself to speak for both of them.

Imilia twisted her head to look at Mabel over her shoulder, a band of flesh tying her to Giulia's midsection. "That is true, though you don't have to speak of it if you don't wish."

Giulia rolled her eyes. "She must speak of it. Everyone else is."

"I bungled an act, hurt Lorenzo, and possibly lost my job. What else can be said?" Mabel replaced the scissors and withdrew a needle and card of thread. She pinched together the seam that had split on the doll's dress. "I have to pull it together before Zagreb, or I will have nowhere to go. What am I without the circus? What am I without all of you?"

Imilia forced Giulia to shift so she could reach for Mabel's hand. "You are still Mabel MacGinnis, with or without the circus."

"I have no idea who she is." Mabel brought the doll to her teeth and bit off the thread. She fluffed the skirt, her fingers snagging on the rough fabric. Then she raised her gaze and looked at her friends. "I wasn't strong today. I was weak. I disappointed the audience, Lorenzo, and your father. I disappointed myself."

"Lorenzo would forgive you of murder," Giulia said. "The audience will have already forgotten about it. And our father will be fine. He always rebounds. Like a cat." With slim fingers, she drew whiskers across her cheeks.

The wagon jolted to a stop, and Mabel disembarked. She darted across the station platform and toward the train car, knowing Giulia and Imilia proceeded at a much slower pace. Ducking her head so she didn't knock it against the door, she found herself barreling into Alyona.

"Oh!" The equestrian stumbled backward.

Mabel reached for Alyona's arm, settling her friend upright. "I'm so sorry." Her cheeks flamed, and with a spin, she darted through the car and into the next one. She entered the dining car and sank down at a table, setting the doll atop it and poking at her missing eye.

Moments later, Alyona sat beside her, and Giulia and Imilia took the bench opposite.

"I'm told you are trying to escape us." Alyona touched Mabel's arm. "I hate to tell you this, but you're on a train. There is nowhere to go."

Imilia's brows arched. "And when have you ever been able to escape the nosiness of family?"

Mabel allowed a smile, then dropped her head into her palms. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to complete my act without disaster. And then what? What will I do?" She had

nowhere to go. She'd been born to the circus. Had assumed she would spend her life in the circus. It was her family. Everything she'd ever known. And the thought of leaving, of going into the world, put so many knots in her belly that not even scissors could untangle them.

There was not a soul in the world blood-related to Mabel. Not one person who would feel any obligation toward her. She was alone. And but for short excursions outside their winter quarters in Bologna and an annual shopping trip when they encamped near Paris, she never went farther than the next town over. Tents and trains had made up her world. She had no notion how to survive outside them.

With jerky movements, she opened the sewing kit and fished a glass button from it. It slid to the table with a little *clink*. She would fix this doll. Stitch it up, clean it with the sliver of Fels-Naptha soap kept in the women's toilet, and convince Karlotta, the seamstress, to spare a scrap of leather for boots.

"I have always thought I was strong. But it has become clear I'm not. I am nothing without Da."

"Mabel, no one knows what tomorrow brings." Alyona took the button and held it to the doll's face. With quick movements, she lifted the threaded needle and jabbed it into the fabric. "You have been with Manzo Brothers Circus every moment of your life. How could you ever be sure what you want?"

"I have never wanted anything else."

Alyona handed Mabel the doll and stood. "Because you've known nothing else."

"What else is there?" Giulia asked. "Stop speaking nonsense."

Alyona ignored her. "I want you to know—to really *know*—that you are more than this circus. More than your father's daughter. More than your act and strength."

"Of course she is." Imilia gave a nod. "She knows this."

The Weight of Air

Mabel smiled, but as she packed up the sewing kit, she wondered. If she found herself without an act to prop herself up on, where would she find her strength? For so long she'd leaned on Da, and without him, she felt as battered as the doll in her hands.