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FOR MY NEXT TRICK

TRISHA BARTLE

The crowd was electric. Despite the small venue, each row of seats was packed with people waiting to see what might happen. They turned to each other. They whispered their theories on how it was done.

“For my next trick, I need a volunteer from the audience.”

She raised her hand timidly, thin fingers playing in the air as a spotlight grazed the sea of people. The theater grew louder. She wasn't the only one vying for the magician's attention. A burly man who'd sat next to her the entire night and who smelled like oregano and too much garlic, stood and leaned forward. His meaty arm passed the heads in the rows ahead of him.

“You there, come on stage,” the magician said, his voice overtaking the zealous crowd through the oversized speakers that framed the stage. He had one arm extended, pointing into the first few rows. Though there was no wind in the small theater, his jet-black hair was ruffled.

“Me?” she asked, glancing around her. The crowd was silent, with all eyes on her. The bright light nearly blinded her and the man to her right grunted a mixture of disappointment and derision.

“Yes, you, in the stunning blue dress. Please join me on stage.” He swirled his arms in a great arc, miming her intended path from audience to the spot by his side. The spectators stayed captivated by his every movement.

She gingerly made her way along the base of the stage. A pimply-faced attendant held her hand as she climbed the steps. As she found her place next to the magician, she could feel envy

radiating off the audience like wavy heat lines over a barbecue grill.

The magician produced a long, thin microphone as if from nowhere and held it toward her. He smelled a lot better than the man in the crowd, like sandalwood and the first ten minutes of fresh rain. “Tell me, do you believe in magic?”

“Well...sure,” she said into the proffered microphone. She tried to focus, to be in the present. Instead, her mind wandered to what she had hidden in the waistband of her dress. Her attention was split between what was happening on stage and when she might get the chance to use it.

A smile spread across the magician’s face, his straight white teeth gleaming in the intense light pouring onto the stage. For a moment, he held her gaze, and she briefly felt like they were the only ones in the room. Indeed, she was the only one who could see the gold flecks in his green eyes. As quickly as it started though, the spell was broken. “Glad to hear it! Then you’re in for a treat, Miss...?”

“Elizabeth,” she answered. A few hoots came from the crowd. Her gaze flitted to the hundreds of pairs of eyes staring at her, and she nervously smoothed out her dress. Her fingers played across the blue lace that marked her waist.

“Then, Miss Elizabeth, I need you to come with me.” He held out his hand and she slipped her own into his grasp. His hand was warm and solid. Self-assured.

He led her to a tall box that had taken residence on stage for the entire show, but hadn’t yet been used. She had heard the people in the rows around her wondering about the shiny black panels for the last hour. Finally, their curiosity would be sated.

The magician led her to the box and opened the door. Inside was all black, so dark that the spotlight framing him couldn’t even reach inside.

“Please, step inside my chamber. I promise you won’t be harmed...at least not fatally.” The crowd guffawed at his joke as he flashed her another disarming smile. It didn’t soothe her nerves. Did he know? Could he tell she was hiding something?

She stuck one foot inside the cabinet, and then the other. The floor felt solid beneath her. Her heels slid across the shiny

surface, made from the same black acrylic that lined the walls and door.

“See you soon, I hope,” he said, before slamming the door with a flourish.

There were no cracks of light streaming in behind the door. She held her hand in front of her face and struggled to see an outline, but found none. Still, she could hear the commotion going on around her.

The music began. Dramatic beats filled with drums and violins, music that often became the soundtrack of her dreams. But before she could start to enjoy it, she heard a familiar clicking.

It was soft at first, almost drowned out by the crowd. Then the clicking intensified, filling the cabinet. Her legs began to vibrate, first at her toes and then slowly up her calves. The chime of the music and swell of the crowd diminished with every click of her descent beneath the stage.

Within seconds the scene changed. She was still standing on the platform, but now she was surrounded by dusty machinery, naked, armless mannequins, and set pieces from a forgotten Old West scene.

A rough hand grabbed her arm and pulled her off the platform. “Quick. We need to send this back up.”

As soon as she was free, standing amidst a pile of mannequin torsos, the man rushed to a wall panel. His tall form hunkered down to accommodate the low, bare ceiling as he pressed a big green button. The clicking resumed and the shiny black platform rose into the ceiling, pulled by four thick metal chains.

“The man expects me to be in two places at once,” he muttered. “I swear if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t deal with his shit anymore.” Before she could respond, the man, clad in acid-washed jeans and a ratty flannel, rushed out of the room.

Elizabeth waited amidst the whorls of dust and the heavy musty scent that reminded her of consignment shops. She was barely able to hear the music above her. She was missing everything. She could only picture the final act of the night. He’d wave his arms to the beat of the music, opening the door to find nothing there. There would be more, but she wouldn’t get to see it. She never got

to see it, but she knew every move by heart.

Suddenly, the noise from the audience swelled. It held its crescendo for what felt like minutes. As the cheers died down, the ceiling vibrated with heavy thuds slowly moving from the theater to the lobby of the aging venue.

She didn't have to wait long. Perched atop a rickety chest labeled "HATS" she heard heavy footsteps approaching, scraping against the smooth concrete of the dusty basement floor.

"You did great!" the magician said as he emerged from the dark recesses that surrounded her.

"Thanks." Her heartbeat quickened. Not enough to create a flush in her face. She'd gotten good at hiding the flush, of keeping herself calm when she was anticipating trouble. She had already made up her mind. This would finally be over.

"I think for Cleveland you should say that you don't believe in magic. Then it would be like I'm proving something—that when you've disappeared and I've eventually taken your place the crowd will be even more impressed." He moved forward and placed a slim hand on her bare shoulder. "I could even have you reappear with tears streaming down your face, like how people act when they see Jesus's face in their toast or something."

"Cleveland?" She fought to keep her face even.

"Yes, that's the next stop on the tour after all. Unless you think two days is too soon for a change-up like this? Faking crying could be tough for you, hon."

"You said this would be the last time."

A wave of pity spread across his face so quickly she almost hadn't seen it. If it weren't for the fact that she'd been with him for almost five years, she might not have noticed. When she first caught his street magic act as she came out of a Starbucks one crisp autumn day five years prior, that bright smile took her in. She was snared by it. In the beginning, she took everything he said as gospel. She believed every word. To her, he was magic. Unfortunately, it took her years to realize it was all a lie.

Just as quickly as it came, the pity was replaced with the plastic smile he used while on stage. "It was really more of an idea than a promise. After all, you want me to succeed, right? You want

me to become the next great American magician. That's what you said the first night we were together. Remember? There was wine. And you were wearing that lacy bra and panty set..."

She shrank away just as his hand was about to caress her bare collarbone. "Yes, I wanted you to succeed, but I want to succeed too. I'll never become a magician if I'm always your plant. Stuck in the audience and then stuck in the basement. This isn't the life I'd hoped for."

He scoffed. The mask was fading away. "You're still on about that? I hate to break it to you, but the only thing you're good for is wearing a pretty dress and stepping into a magic box. Oh, and a few other things, but those aren't suited for the stage."

"How dare you!" Elizabeth shot up from her spot on the "HATS" box, the old wood scraping up against the raw concrete of the theater's basement floor. The heat she tried to carefully to conceal began to creep up her chest, coloring her neck crimson. Again, her hand shot to her waistband.

He grabbed hold of her then, pinning her arms in an embrace. At first, she struggled then she began to melt. This was his signature move. "I'm sorry babe, I didn't mean that. You know I didn't. I just get really passionate after a show." He rested his chin on top of her head, rustling her black curls.

"You promised..." she whispered. Her resolve began to crumble.

"I know I did. But I tried a different plant before. That girl couldn't act to save her life. I saw the contempt on the audience's face. They weren't fooled. She had nothing on you."

He pulled her away just enough to gaze a moment into her eyes. That gaze still captivated her after so many years. The shiver of desire never truly went away. He pressed his soft lips against hers and, for a moment, the dusty mannequins and tired set pieces fell away.

She had warned herself before the show had even started that he'd do this. She still held hope, though. Maybe she wouldn't have to use it after all. She pulled away from his double-edged kiss and put her head on his shoulder.

"Try something different then. Or maybe don't use a plant

at all,” she said, her voice lightly muffled by the suit fabric covering his solid, ropy shoulder. Comfort. “I could be your assistant at least, up there with you. It would be almost like a dance. Then we could live our love openly. It could even make the act better. I could help you.”

He jerked away, pushing her back. Her knees buckled as her calves banged against the “HATS” box. She sat down atop its aged wood with a thud.

“Help me? *Help* me? I don’t need anyone’s help, let alone from someone with no skills.” He clenched his jaw so hard she could see the muscles working and moving under the sharp cheekbones she used to love so much.

She stood again, intent now more than ever to finally stand her ground. “I designed half of your tricks and the other half you stole from other magicians.”

“Bullshit. And even if it wasn’t bullshit, and I’m not saying it isn’t, it takes real showmanship to do what I do—to captivate the audience. Something you and those hacks don’t have. When I found you, you were still working at your uncle’s disgusting taxidermy shop. It’s time you thanked me. When we get to Cleveland, you’ll be in the audience where you belong.”

“No.”

“Are you sure you want to say that? I’ll tell you again. You’ll be in the audience where you belong. And if you think you can get by without me, think again.” He paused, stretching his usually delicate hand into a practiced fist. “I don’t know what’s more laughable - the thought of making our relationship public or the thought of you trying to be a real magician. If you try to leave me, I’ll destroy you. I did it to the last girl and I’ll do it to you. You always wondered what happened to Leanne, my first and last magician’s assistant. I don’t think you want to find out.”

Her heart thumped inside her chest. She finally had a glimpse of the man she always expected hid beneath that handsome, charismatic exterior. Her fingers went to her waistband, where she felt the familiar outline of a small vial. It was so slight it would go undetected unless you knew it was there. But she was good at concealment, something she had to coach him on from the

beginning and that he never truly mastered.

“You’re right, honey. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.” The crimson color drained from her neck as she again buried her fire deep within.

“Right. That’s right honey.” He put his arm around her shoulders. “Now, let’s celebrate another successful show with a glass of champagne.”

Two Years Later

Dizzy. The crowd made her feel dizzy. She’d only been at it for two years now, yet the hum of the crowd still pumped her up. When she was alone on stage hearing their awed gasps, she knew that this time it was for her. It made her veins feel like they were filled with electrified crystal.

Her show was different. All of the showmanship that made her ex’s act seem so stodgy and out-of-touch was absent from her 90-minute thrill ride. “Thrill ride.” That’s what one impressed critic wrote on his magic fan blog.

Now she was on the stage in Cleveland. The biggest venue in town, not counting sports arenas. Even though he’d toured through Cleveland a dozen times, he was always at the smaller theaters, the ones that usually filled the audience for off-off-off Broadway plays performed by local youths. And she was there too, back then. In the crowd where she “belonged.”

Just like last year, her first year as a headlining magician, she planned something special for the Cleveland show. She didn’t call anyone up from the audience. Most people were skeptical of that. She had her own volunteer of sorts, though.

But first there was the buildup. Although she’d shared some ideas with the magician, she saved her best material for her own act. She glided across the stage, performing one trick after another like a dance. Each one was so meticulously timed that the applause rarely had a chance to die down. With each successful sleight of hand and grand reveal, her heart raced. She kept calm, though. She didn’t want her giddy excitement to show.

She used the whole auditorium, not just the stage. She used the walls and the ceiling, the aisles and the seats. The audience felt like they were a part of the act. And when it came time for her final trick, she used her most important prop just for Cleveland.

The ushers and ticket-takers weren't able to sneak into the show like they normally did, but that didn't keep them from gushing to Elizabeth once the night was done. It had been a packed house. All they could do was wait in the lobby for the show to end. While they stood, holding their brooms and dustpans, they listened to the swell of the crowd.

First, there was laughter, then gasps. Finally, the applause was so loud behind those closed theater doors that one timid usher had to cover his ears. The applause held for seconds that grew into minutes. As it quieted down, the theater doors opened and guests began streaming into the lobby.

"I have no idea how she did it," one man exclaimed. He rested a palm on one cheek, unable to keep his mouth from falling open slightly.

"Damien would love this. We're bringing him next year," said another patron to the woman he'd hooked his arm around.

"It looked so real," a teenage girl said. She gazed at the program she held in her hands. It was wrinkled from the firm grasp she'd had on it throughout the show. She would squeeze and pull at it at every big reveal.

Her date looked just as amazed. "Of course it wasn't, though. That's about the only part of the trick I could explain. Not how she got that mannequin to fly though, or how he appeared behind us in a matter of seconds. It was amazing."

"And a handsome mannequin, too. He had a practically disarming smile. You should take some lessons from that thing."

"Gross, Joann." The couple weaved into the thickest part of the crowd now leaving the theater and entering the cool autumn air. Their comments became buried in a crowd of murmured astonishment and exclamations of joy.

While the ushers were finally able to start sweeping up the auditorium, Elizabeth was in the little basement below the stage. Although she had a loyal crew of five to help her transport most of

her things to and from the trailer they hauled behind her tour bus, there was one prop she dealt with all by herself.

She learned a lot when she was working for her uncle, before she'd ever met the magician. In his shop, she learned about skinning and tanning. About stuffing the cavity with wool and wire. About using glass eyes to make faces look lifelike.

Now, years after leaving his shop, she still remembered how to do it. Preparing, stuffing and mounting. She pushed her finale prop into a large box. Back-first, she pushed and folded its limbs. She took a moment to caress its hair, now bleached blond rather than the jet-black that diehard magic fans might recognize.

Surprisingly its skin was smooth to the touch, almost like soft, cream-colored leather. One last look and she was ready to pack it away again, hidden in a safe place in her home until her next special show in Cleveland. There it waited while she toured the country, living her dream.

"This is all you're good for," she whispered before replacing the lid on the box. As it settled into place, the smell of sandalwood and fresh rain mixed with chemicals only a taxidermy enthusiast would recognize wafted out from the mass inside. Across the old, warped wood was spray-painted one word: "HATS."