

The word "Trick" is written in a highly decorative, black, calligraphic font. The letters are thick and feature elaborate flourishes, particularly on the 'T' and 'k'. The word is centered on the page. Above the letter 'i' and below the letter 'i' are two identical, light gray crowns with five points and small dots at the tips of the points. The overall design is elegant and whimsical.

# Trick

*a foolish love story*

Natalia Jaster

# Prologue



## *Jester*

Come here, my sweeting. I have a story to share. I shall amuse you, I promise. 'Tis what I do best. If you consider my costume, with its frills and thrills, 'twill be more obvious.

Ay, come to me, and fear not, for I'm renowned. My nails are groomed, my skin is fair, and my smile wickedly pretty. Courtiers say so while tittering behind their goblets. Their teeth scrape over the rims, their lips tinted from wine as they talk of my skills: the ones I perform in halls, as well as in beds, with assorted tastes and... companions.

I know what people think, for I'm attuned to the whispers in this castle. They float around on giddy breezes, easy to catch if you're sly.

Have I not mentioned that I live in a castle? You'll learn more about that soon.

Indeed, I have your attention. Splendid.

My name is Poet. What is yours?

Hush. Let me guess.

Now allow me to list my attributes. I can flip across a floor like

liquid, juggle circles around you, or steal your breath with a twirl. I speak with the silver tongue of a trickster. If you ask nicely, I shall delight you with a rhyme, a few lines of verse spun from gold. If you ask even nicer, I might grace you with that rhyme in private. As you like.

I'm a trinket, a servant of the Crown. I'm a riddle, a hidden agenda.  
The better to outwit you.

I'm the finest jest you'll ever know. If you irritate me, I'll best you with words, for swords are the toys of knights, whilst I use more creative weapons.

That doesn't mean I don't know how to handle a blade. For I can. And I have. Many times, I've carried one with me whilst sneaking out of this stronghold, passing in and out of shadows, with the guards none the wiser. A knife has been necessary on those nights, and reaching my precious destination, my dearest little secret, has been worth the risk.

Still, my wit is sharper than a dagger. And oh, that is the grandest triumph, because it bests even the most regal of this kingdom. For only a clever man knows how to play a fool. I've spent my life, all nineteen years of it, learning how.

Yet none of these skills can steel the heart, nor protect it from breaking. Recently, I've learned that lesson well. So let me tell you a tale of how I lost a battle of wills.

Not to my King. Not to my Queen.

Nay. I lost to a girl.

# 1



## *Princess*

I took a deep, floral breath and held it. Held it good and tight.

In the distance, beyond the castle walls, sunset gathered on the horizon. A gust of wind laughed its way through the landscape. Blossoms sang and grasses clapped.

Surrounding this stronghold was the lower town. Surrounding both, the wildflower hills. And surrounding the hills, the floral forest where petals sprouted from the trees.

A nation of rebirth and artistry.

Gripping the balcony's ledge, I exhaled and stared at the view. Father used to say most fondly that this place brought out the sprite in everyone. In me, especially.

If he were alive today, if he knew me now, he would be wrong.

A fortnight of travel had brought me to Whimtany, the Spring Kingdom, the so-called merry world away from the perpetual Autumn of my own land. Every year, the Royals traveled to this region for a truce gathering between the four Seasons.

It was an important cause, but I still felt that same exhausting tug

in my soul that I always felt being here. I didn't want to be a Spring guest. I didn't want to attend the welcome banquet tonight, nor did I wish to drink or to dance.

Most certainly not to dance. Not at all.

Of course, this wasn't about me. And a princess never sulked.

Glancing away from Whimtany's vista, I returned to the confines of my suite: vases filled with cherry buds, musical instruments on display, linen bedding as light as butterfly wings, and Spring's colors of green and pink. The kinds of colors that seemed to wake you up the moment your eyes landed on them.

I was raised on sensible reds and browns. Mista, the serene Kingdom of Autumn. My home.

One month. One month in this castle, and then I could return.

My traveling trunk had been unpacked and my clothes stored. Wrapped in a dressing gown, I stepped toward the wardrobe to choose something to wear for the evening.

That's when I saw it. A scarlet ribbon tied into a bow. It quivered atop my bed pillows.

I turned a full circle, scrutinizing the room.

No one. Alone.

But somebody *had* been in my chamber. And they wanted me to know it.

None had bestowed a welcome favor upon me yet. Was this ribbon some newfound style of Whimtany greeting? Was an Autumn shade chosen specifically to acknowledge me?

I was no stranger to this kingdom, with its taste for revelry, but this was odd. Truly odd, even for this sprightly land. And the only other person who'd been in here was a maid, a chatty bird of a girl who'd come bearing linens and gossip.

The ribbon could have been a random oversight, a misplaced decoration or mending supply. Except that I could not remember it being there a few minutes ago, long after the maid had left.

The door would have groaned if someone else had entered—someone who'd had the *nerve* to enter without my permission. And I should

have heard the noise from the balcony.

Whoever it had been, he or she must have moved soundlessly behind my back.

Who would take such liberty? A noble?

I did not trust a token given anonymously. Pursing my lips, I walked over to the bed, snatched up the ribbon, placed it in the nearest drawer, and wiped my hands.

There. Onward now. I would address the cheeky item later.

The door swooped open. My mother skipped inside, flew straight to the bed, and threw herself onto it. "Mmm," she cooed, her eyelids fluttering closed as she pawed at the blankets. "Your bed is comfortable."

I set my hands on my hips. "Mother."

"All these feathers."

"Mother."

"Yes, dearest Daughter?"

"You are not sleeping here tonight."

She snuggled into the down. "Oh, so soft. So queenly. I shall have a good rest tonight."

"I know you heard me."

My mother, Queen Avalea of Mista, released a dramatic whine. "You don't understand. My suite is facing north—it's a full moon and thus bad luck to sleep alone. We must join forces. A woman never knows when a phantom might sneak into her chamber to claim her in the dead of night."

"You're of age now," I answered. "You'll manage on your own."

"So strict to your mother. What have I done to deserve it, Briar?"

Even her pouty voice sounded buxom. I regarded her expression, feeling a rush of tenderness. I loved her. She loved me. That wasn't the problem.

Father was the problem. His memory lived between us, slumbering in our rooms, feasting at our table. Daily, he strung us together and tore us apart. A long time ago, I'd done my worst to him. I could not undo it, and he was gone—and no matter how many years passed,

no matter how I tried to atone and fix myself, to be perfect for the leftovers of our family, the guilt was eternal.

I did not deserve Mother. I would not permit myself to get close to her.

Because what if I lost her, too?

She made a show of stirring, not just with her sparkling eyes but with her whole body, with her limbs stretching to the end of the bed and the crisp scent of apples from home infused into her hair—red like mine, but aged to rust. Aside from our tresses, we were nothing alike. When I was born, the people of Mista had foreseen another jewel. They got me instead.

To the naive and the uninspired, princesses were supposed to be lovely, from their slippers to their tiaras. A princess possessed the desired traits: long curls, a rosette mouth, actual height. Royals were the pinnacle of beauty.

No one imagined a princess ugly or plain. Or, Seasons forbid, sharp. A princess was the bud of the flower, not the thorn.

The assumption was quite stupid. Mista had not anticipated a girl like me. A short, knobby-elbowed, simple-faced eighteen-year-old bramble with dull irises, pinched features, and the body of a twig. I didn't see a problem with this, except it made me appear too much like my dead father and not enough like my living mother. Her subjects wanted the future queen to be honorable, but also a duplicate of Mother: radiant and overflowing with what they called sociability.

She was a wise ruler, but she had her amiable ways of getting things done. And I would have my own someday, exercising sound judgment and a steadfast mind. I wouldn't require the people's adoration, only their respect and loyalty.

In the meantime, I needed to be home, not here losing the chance to make contributions where I could. Although I was next in line for Autumn's throne, the peace talks excluded offspring. As part of the custom, the meetings were restricted to the current rulers. Impractical, if one asked me.

Ages differed between the lands' children. Summer's boy was in

his eighth year. Because Winter had two queens, their successor was an eleven-year-old grandnephew. And Spring's daughter was still in the nursery. There was no basis for us to meet and bond yet, so to that end, I remained the only Royal youth who attended this event.

Mother wanted me close. Her hope to share my bed had nothing to do with full moons and apparitions, and everything to do with recreating the first time she brought me here, when I was six and needed her beside me in order to rest. Back when we were a complete family. When this place didn't yet hold painful memories.

Since then, she has tried to rekindle that night, like it might be a cure. It has come to the point where her attempts and my refusals have morphed into a ritual. She nudged, and I made the excuse that she kicked in her sleep.

"Oh, no," Mother said. "You look cross. What is it this time?" She patted the space beside her. "Come. Join me amidst the fluffy. Tell me all about it."

The sight of her spreading her arms to my troubles choked me with longing. I wanted to curl up with her and explain myself, my words kept safe against her breast. I wanted to tell her that she should have left me behind in Mista, where I could help run the kingdom in her absence instead of leaving it to her advisors.

I refused to, though. The very act of confiding anything, to anyone, made me queasy.

The mystery gift bestowed upon me was another inexplicably vexing matter. But if I showed the ribbon to her, she would only tease me for taking the gesture too seriously.

I retreated to the wardrobe while saying, "We need to get ready for the banquet."

A ninny's remark, since I was the only one not dressed. It also came out sterner than I'd meant it to.

A vanity mirror hung above the dressing table. As I chose a sober but stately gown of maroon velvet, in the reflection I saw Mother flinch, chafing me with remorse. I opened my mouth to apologize just as she forced a smile onto her face. She swung her legs over the



side of the bed and sashayed toward me, her hips jutting from side to side. How did she move that way so effortlessly?

"Is that what you're wearing?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"No," she said. "Not in this kingdom."

Reaching over my shoulder, she thrust her hand into the wardrobe, crowded with the fall colors of Mista. She withdrew an alternative, a new design that she'd ordered from the seamstresses.

I dutifully let her button me up, trapping me in it. The ruby silk gown had elbow-length sleeves and a square neckline—a *low* square neckline. The bodice had a gap running down the center, allowing an under panel to peek through. The hem bustled around my knees while a longer skirt of lighter, blushing silk flared out beneath.

Two embellishments followed: a belt made of rubies shaped into leaves and a matching pair of hair clips. Mother argued with me, declaring the clips should sweep half the hair off my face, letting the rest tumble recklessly down my back, in the fashion of Whimtany ladies. The very idea made me uncomfortable. An Autumn girl did no such thing—plaits and headdresses reigned in Mista—and allowing my hair to run rampant across my back was a recipe for tangles.

In addition, my flaming tresses would draw the sort of male attention that I did not care for, despite my being unwed. At the dressing table, I tore a brush through my hair, wove my locks into a braid at the crown of my head, and secured it with the clips. I was a future monarch, not a mermaid.

Mother threw up her hands. "Oh, Briar. I give up."

Not a moment later, company arrived in a whirlwind of petal-woven gowns. Seven courtiers, all my age. Spring girls. Some of them had tanned skin, kissed by the sun, while others had darker skin, like rich sable. By comparison, I was as pale as flour.

They dashed into the room so fast that when they stopped, they skittered across the floor and bumped into each other, then burst into a collective chortle that could have split the ceiling.

Cadence. Fae. Lisette. Vale. Posy. Questa. Rhiannon.

A row of curtsies:

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty."

A pause. I waited as the Silly Seven finally remembered themselves. "Your Highness," they said to me in unison, but not with the same joy as they'd addressed Mother.

They went straight to her, surrounding her like bejeweled puppies wagging their tails, yipping over each other in excitement. "Welcome back, Your Majesty," and "We've missed you," and "I'm swooning over the banquet," and "There's going to be such levity," and "I'm in love," and "She's always in love," and "But I'm in *real* love."

The Seven listed the guests coming tonight, every nobleman and woman. However, they kept going back to the entertainment, hinting at a grand performance while withholding the details. They cast each other knowing glances and gushed over the delicious secret of it.

A fine line existed between distinguished fun and Spring fun. No doubt we were going to be subjected to a sword-swallower with ogre arms.

I remained at the vanity, watching as the group modeled their gowns, spreading their skirts wide. They hummed a tune and began to dance, circling one another airily.

As Mother laughed with them, I squeezed my hands in my lap. I felt like a child locked inside my room, glaring at the children who played outdoors.

"Join them, Briar," Mother encouraged. "Go on. For me."

I had wounded her once already. I could not refuse.

I partook in the dance, self-conscious because this would not end well. Though bred to walk with grace, dance lessons had been wasted on me. This had been clear from childhood, as I lacked natural

rhythm. I hadn't the ability to spin as the other girls did, each bone in my body tensing like I'd been nailed together.

Mother rose from her perch by the hooded fireplace. "If you'll excuse me, ladies," she announced, the tassels around her waist knocking together. "Do keep Briar company."

She bobbed her finger toward me and mouthed a silent *stay*, then left.

I grumbled inwardly. I was quite sure the others did as well. They did not verbally react to me treading on their toes. Instead, they beamed to my face, though I spied them trading very different looks over my shoulder.

Posy slid away from us and began to nose around in my things. My shoes lined beside the wardrobe. My basket of handkerchiefs. My favorite quill.

Then she trotted to the window and unfastened it. Not an instant into her daydream, she gasped, "Oh, my Spring! It's him!"

The dance broke apart. Pandemonium ensued. The girls stam-peded over to the sill—what in the world?!—squishing their heads through the gap.

"Your Highness, you must have a look," Posy whispered.

"A long look," Fae purred.

"Your Highness, may we watch him from your balcony?" Questa pleaded.

"Are you mad?" Vale asked, winding her dark arm around Posy's waist. "He'll hear us there."

"If Posy's squeal didn't alert him already," Rhiannon said.

"He'll see us, too," Lisette added.

"No, he won't," Questa argued. "He's...busy."

Cadence ran her finger across the sill. "Devil, take me."

"Take me prisoner," Fae amended, earning a round of giggles.

"Your Highness," Posy chirped. "You shall miss him."

No, I would not. I took my time reaching them, hardly in the mood to fuss over some buck. The group parted, allowing me to peek out the window and feign interest for their sake. The view spanned not

only the hills of Whimtany, but also one of the castle gardens below.  
High bushes and low dahlia beds.

And, like a sudden quickening of the pulse, there he was.