

# How to Steal a Jester's Heart

Fantasy / Romance / Dark Fantasy

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**Some curses never disappear... they just wait for you.**

Odessa has always been good at solving puzzles. At her elite academy, riddles are currency, and secrets are a skillset. But no riddle has haunted her more than the strange visions that have started to flicker at the edges of her mind. She lives next to a town haunted by a forgotten legend, a traveling circus that vanished without a trace, leaving behind only rumors of a curse and a few brittle pages in the archives. So when her boyfriend invites her to a circus popping up in that very town, Odessa says yes.

**Just for fun. Just a show. And then the lights went out.**

The moment she steps beneath the tent, nothing feels quite real. Visions flicker at the edges of her mind. Time slips sideways. Faces in the crowd seem to know her name before she speaks. And the deeper she's pulled into the performance, the more Odessa begins to wonder if the curse ever ended or if it's been waiting for someone like her. Cornered by the invisible rules of a figure she can't see, Odessa is forced into a game she never meant to play... and a role she never knew she wanted.

**Because some stories don't stay buried...**

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## PROLOGUE

The sun burns bright on my face, but there is something different about the light. I hold my hand out in front of my face, blocking the sunbeams so I can properly see where I am. It feels like I am waking up from a long sleep, and not only is my vision a bit blurry, but so is my mind.

Around me are several tents printed with different colors and patterns. After a few seconds, I start seeing everything more clearly. And it seems like there is a problem because all the colors seem to be faded. It is like my vision works in black and white, except for some areas, that are different shades of gray and even fewer that are colored in vague shades.

Looking up at the sky, it is gray which in the town I live in, is normal. The sky is most days covered with gray clouds, even in the summers it can be like a gray lid over our heads. Almost making it seem like we are locked inside a very depressing little snow globe.

The days the sun shines, it is higher than most places in the world and it seems like it burns just for us. People are running around hysterically, trying to soak up whatever sunbeams they can allow their skin.

Despite the chaos, I love our town most when people are happy and normal and we stop acting like this place hides the darkest secrets. I have always enjoyed puzzles and mysteries, but I do worry when they become too terrifying. I have never been a fan of horror movies or being scared. I prefer other ways to get my blood going.

This never fully stopped me from wanting mystery, which is why the town dressed in gray clouds like this, never truly brought me to a

bad mood. That is also why this sky is not too unfamiliar, but in this case, it seems like the sky is gray without any of the clouds. And I feel like I should have a reason to be nervous about it.

In front of me is a big tent, covered with what I think is normally bright red and white stripes. On top of it, there is a big sign spelling out *CIRCUS* in big letters.

I do not know why the sight of it makes my toes curl and my stomach twists with panic at the same time. I loved the circus as a child, there was nothing I loved more actually.

I used to live on the outskirts of town with my entire family, not just my parents but my grandparents as well. Every time the circus came to town, my grandmother would take me.

Considering how much I loved it, I am surprised by how little I remember. What I do remember is that I used to love the lights you could buy. They had lots of thin plastic strings you could swing around in the air, making the light dance. There were also blinking ones, but they were more expensive.

The clowns never scared me but the tigers and lions did. My favorite part of the act was the jesters on the one-wheel bikes. My grandmother always told me that was quite odd of me.

The last time I went, I think I was around ten. It was around that time that the circus stopped travelling because of the animal torture aspect of it. I remember one time when one of the bigger elephants escaped the tent, and it was all over the newspaper. Everyone panicked and blamed the animal rather than the caretakers working with the circus who actually tortured it.

My grandmother and I had kept our seats on the stand, sharing pink cotton candy and watching everyone run around like panicked ants, until a policeman came and told us we had to leave.

Because of the morals and maybe because of fear or spite, people simply stopped going after that, and they lost interest in it once the circus removed the animals from the act. So did I, but I will admit I still miss it.

I do not know why the sight of the sign fills me with such terror. Maybe because there is no sign of any people. Also because I can see the wind playing with the tents but feel nothing against my face.

I do not know why I am holding my breath, because I should not be afraid. I take a deep breath and put one foot in front of the other to start walking towards the bigger tent. When I reach it I hear a sound behind me, like someone throwing a stone.

The sound echoes in my head and before I know it, I start running. Fear courses through my veins and when I look back all I see are the tents surrounding the area. I realize I am not running from anything and if I am I would not know from what. Feeling ridiculous, I stop. I should have looked behind me to see what caused the sound before I panicked.

A bit embarrassed, I start to stroll between the tents until I see a big statue in front of me. It looks like a circus instructor. He has the outfit for it and a tall hat on his head. He is holding something in his hand, but I can not see what it is, so I walk closer. I can not see his face either because I am seeing it from the back.

When I reach it, I hear that sound again and turn around fast to see what it is. But there is nothing there, or no one.

My heart pumps hard against my chest.

“Hello? Is anybody there?” No answer.

But then there is the same sound again. I turn back to the statue, only to find it is not there anymore. I back away slowly, wanting to wake up from whatever twisted dream this is. Looking down at my feet I see a small sheet of paper on the ground, with something handwritten on it.

*You are not dreaming.*

I start hyperventilating and instead of looking around for who could have written the note I keep backing away, dropping the note and letting the wind carry it away.

All of a sudden, I feel myself walking into someone from the back. I do not have the time to see who it is before I scream. Light surrounds me, and then I hear a voice yelling something.

Yelling my name.



## CHAPTER ONE

“Odessa! Odessa! What’s wrong?”

I open my eyes to find I am standing in my local café. In front of me is the new girl in the cashier looking at me confused because I am next in line. Beside me is my boyfriend Ashton looking at me like I am a ghost.

“Why were you screaming? Are you in any pain?” he asks, grabbing my hand. When I look down at his hand in mine, I can see that I am shaking.

“I’m fine. I don’t know what came over me.”

Ashton looks at me like he does not quite believe me but does not say anything further. I turn to the girl in the cashier.

“Sorry, did you say something?” I ask her.

“I was just asking if you wanted your latte with oat or regular milk?”

She has strawberry blonde hair and big brown eyes looking at me like a lost deer.

“Oat, please,” I murmur before leaning myself against Ashton.

“Go wait outside. I’ll grab our coffees when they are ready. I think you better get some air, love.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I slowly start to walk towards the door, with a huge headache, hoping this is something the coffee can fix.

Outside the sky is blue and the sun stands high, which is not helping. I sit down by one of the tables and take a few deep breaths. When I glance down at my feet, I imagine the same note I saw earlier.

I do not know what just happened in there but with every second that passes it seems the dream is fading and eventually I can not remember a single thing.

I hear the doorbell and look up to see Ashton coming out with our coffees in hand. I stand up to grab mine, making it easier for him to open the door properly.

We start walking towards the center of the town square, which is not very large considering we live in a small town. At first, the coffee tastes weird but I realize it is because the barista took regular milk instead of oat like I asked. But I drink it anyway and almost finish the whole cup before Ashton turns to me.

“What happened in there? Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I scared you.”

“Is it your period? You know caffeine makes it worse when you have cramps.”

“I’m not on my period, Ash.”

“Then what was it?”

“I told you, nothing. I think I’m just tired.”

“You start screaming now when you’re tired?” he asks, his eyebrows knitting together.

“Ash, please. Just let it go.”

“Fine,” he responds curtly.

My headache is making it hard to turn this bad tension around when all I can think about is another coffee to make this go away. I walk towards the big tree next to the fountain and sit on a bench to stay in the shadows. Ashton sits down next to me and takes my hand.

“I love you,” he says, as if he is not sure what else to say.

I do not know why he lets the smallest of bad tension take up so much significance when I only need a minute to slow my heartbeats down.

“I love you too,” I whisper with my eyes closed.

When I open them I smile at him before I move over to sit in his lap instead. I play with his blonde curls, falling in front of his face, and watch his eyes roam across my face with such dedication, that it immediately puts me in a better mood.

“I always loved this one the most,” I say smiling down at the brown curl wrapped around my finger. He told me he has had it since he was born, and it has only grown darker every year. He smiles back at me and kisses me on the nose.

“Have you decided what you want to do yet, about this weekend?” he murmurs against my cheek.

“What do you mean?”

“The circus?”

The word alone sends a ripple of unease through me, a sudden rush of anxiety tightening my chest. But I can’t remember why. It’s like trying to recall a dream, faint fragments slipping through my fingers, dissolving faster with every second. The harder I try to grasp it, the more it fades, until all left is an empty, lingering sense of something forgotten.

“What?”

“You wanted to go to the circus in Jestertown. But the drive will take almost a day and you did not want to leave Chess alone that long, since we just got him.”

It is like my whole life returns to me all at once.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Right, it slipped my mind.”

Chess is our kitten that we just got to take home, a little bit less than a month ago. He has white fur and ice-blue eyes but what I love about him is that in between his eyes, he has a small spot with black fur shaped like a heart. I have a birthmark shaped like a small heart in the same spot where my skin is a shade darker. So when we saw him in the pet shop I knew it was meant to be.

I remember reading some time ago that if you have some sort of beauty mark or birthmark of any kind, that's the place where your lover in your past lives used to kiss you the most.

I am still waiting for the moment Ashton will kiss me there. The thought of reuniting with the same lover in every new life sounds like the most romantic phenomena to me. But he has not yet, he prefers to kiss me on the nose.

“We just talked about it yesterday and you told me you wanted the night to think about it. So did you make a decision?”

I do not know what to answer, the memories of the conversation are just coming back to me.

Slowly, I start recalling how I had mentioned wanting to go to the circus. As mentioned, I used to love it and it rarely is a thing anymore. So when I heard there was one traveling to a town or ours nearby, I could not help but feel tempted.

On the other hand, I would feel worried about leaving behind Chess since he barely has had the time to get used to us or our apartment. It feels wrong to leave him away or have someone watch over him this soon, as well so I do not see any other option.

“I think we should catch them next time. It feels wrong to leave him this early, don't you think?”

Sunbeams dance over his face, playing in between the trees and when they hit his eyes, it looks like they are glowing. Normally they are a darker shade of brown but in the sun they always look more yellow.

“Yes. I agree. I just wanted to make sure, you seemed excited about it.” He kisses me on the cheek, before sliding me off his lap to stand up. “And you know I just want to make you happy.” he continues with his back towards me.

“I am happy.”

I stand up and wrap my arms around him from the back. When I rest my head on his muscled back, I feel his heartbeats and they are as rapid as a rabbit’s, especially when they are scared.

“Are you okay? Your heart is beating really fast.”

“Of course I’m okay. I’m just a bit tired as well.”

He can see by the look on my face that it does not sound as convincing as he might have wanted it to, but as he brings my hand to his chest, his heartbeats are solid and calm, like they should be.

Before I have the time to get lost in my thoughts, he pulls me towards him and kisses me. His lips have always been so warm against mine, so soft. The feeling of when you get home from a hard day of stress and obligations and then get to take a shower, prepare some food and watch a nice movie. It feels rewarding and it feels safe.

He breaks the kiss to look at me.

“So, what do you want to do today? You don’t have class until later, right?”

“At five,” I say, smiling back up at him.

Ashton too likes to play with my curls but mine are much wilder than his. His seem like they fall perfectly into place like they were sculptured to remain the way they are on his head.

Mine looks more like a wildfire and gives the feeling of a bush from a wild forest. The volume bothered me when I was a child because I never knew how to style it or wear it differently than how they just are. But now I love my hair, it is strong and healthy without me having to do much about it. And I always love the way it glows in the sun.

“Do you want to go to the bookstore?” he asks with a playful smile. “A new one opened on the street of your favorite coffee shop.” Just the thought of coffee and books fills me with warmth.

“What? How have I not heard about this?” I squeal in excitement jumping up and down like a child.

“I didn’t see any promotion about it either but I passed it on my way from school yesterday and hoped you hadn’t so I could surprise you.”

We start to walk to the bus station and I catch myself with a bad feeling in my stomach like something is wrong. I do my best to ignore it as we sit down on the bench, which is hot from the sun underneath the fabric of my summer dress.

I have always secretly found the end of the summer the very best part of it, just because the transfer to fall is more romantic than anything else. But this year I find myself much more impatient with the tip over from summer to fall.

The weather is still hot and sunny which is very unusual for late September and as I watch across the street, some stores are already

decorated with pumpkins. I secretly make a wish for this summer to end so we can all start to enjoy fall properly.

When our bus arrives, I am still left with my headache and as soon as we sit down, I lean against Ashton's shoulder which quickly pushes me into sleep.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is, in many ways, a love letter to my odd, but hardly uncommon, fascination with circuses and their eerie, enchanting aesthetic. It all began when I was a kid watching the *Scooby-Doo* episode *Bedlam in the Big Top*, but the obsession truly took hold when I first met Jerome Valeska in *Gotham*. His thrilling and horrifying portrayal of what we now know as the Joker left a permanent mark on me. There was something so magnetic about his madness, his performance made me equally terrified and captivated by circus life, and the villains who call it home.

Years later, in 2022, I discovered *Caraval* by Stephanie Garber, which only pulled me deeper into the magical haze I never wanted to leave. She did something extraordinary, blurring the line between wonder and danger, magic and madness.

With *How to Steal a Jester's Heart*, I can only hope to bring you even a fraction of the feeling those stories gave me. The thrill. The fear. The beauty. The chaos.

Welcome to the show.



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