

The Art of a Good Trick

The secret of a good trick is to claim you'll do something so outrageous that people can't help but watch, even if only to see you fail. If you tell the right story, your audience will be hooked, and the rest is all about the performance — controlling their attention, directing where they look and what they feel. Making the impossible possible.

That was what Flick needed to do now. The only way she could get the Bell System was to promise to give it to Dominic Drake. If she could pull this off it would make sawing a woman in half look easy. It would require the mother of all tricks.

Flick was escorted back to the tent by a member of the production crew, where she found a seat at the back and flopped down. What was she going to tell her mum? She would be thrilled that Flick was one of only four contestants to be selected. Flick couldn't explain to her that the only way she could compete was to agree to cheat. To agree to help Drake steal her father's last trick.

Flick waited in the tent for the final few contestants to be called, guilt gnawing away inside her. There were a couple of camera crews circling, filming the contestants as they waited. Two cameramen were lapping up the Harry and Ruby show on the stage, which now seemed to be on its fifth encore. Flick hoped they'd saved some material for their future TV careers. One of the crew had clearly been ordered to get plenty of material on her. They were trying to be subtle but the lens spent a lot of time panning in her direction. She suddenly realized her mum would see this, and she had an amazing skill at knowing when something was wrong. So Flick swallowed down the guilt, pushing the lie deeper so not even a chink of it would show. She hoped she didn't look too sick.

When she didn't think she could wait any longer, Christina finally reappeared on the stage, and Flick breathed a sigh of relief.

Christina whooped into the microphone. "I'd like you all to put your hands together, please, to welcome someone very special. Ladies and gentlemen . . . boys and girls... I give you...my co-host...MR...DOMINIC... DRAKE!"

Drake strode onto the stage waving his cane triumphantly and grabbed the microphone from Christina, nearly knocking her over.

He pointed at her as he said, "Thank you. Give her a big round of applause. My assistant, the lovely Christina Morgan. Didn't she do well?"

Christina's face was full plastic smile, but her eyes gave her away.

Drake continued, "I'm going to reveal to you all, right now, who worked out the trick correctly and will be entering the Fox's Den."

A member of the production crew walked on and handed him a golden envelope, which he opened with an exaggerated flourish.

"We have a couple of hundred of you here today. But out of all of you, only the following four have been successful." He paused for effect, staring deadpan into the camera. Music with a rhythm like a heartbeat played as the tension built and built. Drake continued to stand there for what felt like a lifetime.

Finally he announced, "In no particular order, the winners are..."

The music changed key and the rhythm got stronger. Some children were on their feet now, shouting, but still Drake paused.

Eventually he said, "Harry Townsend, Ruby Townsend, Charlie Riley and Felicity Lions."

The audience erupted into yells and groans of disappointment as people realized their names were not on the list. This was punctuated with pockets of joy as others gathered around the winners.

Flick sat very still and felt a bit sick.

Drake had to shout to be heard over the noise. "Can those four please come on up to the stage?"

Without warning, Flick was gently pulled to her feet by a member of the film crew and then propelled forward through the crowd towards the front. She passed one or two in the audience who were crying while their friends tried to console them — telling them the test was too difficult and it was pure luck the winners had got it right.

As Flick neared the front, Drake said, "I'll leave you in the capable hands of my assistant while I get this show started."

He disappeared off the stage, leaving Flick to wonder how much he'd been paid for his five minutes' work.

She reached the steps to the stage and stopped. Stairs were not her thing, and she didn't want to fall over on TV, so she took them slowly, one at a time, holding on to the handrail and making sure both feet were on each step before she attempted the next one. The others were on the stage already and Christina awkwardly fiddled with the microphone while they all waited. Eventually Flick stepped up and joined them. All four contestants now stood in a line.

Christina advanced towards them. "The rules of the competition mean you will be split into two teams. That won't be a problem for you two, though, will it, as you're brother and sister, right?"

She shoved the microphone into the face of Harry Townsend. Up close, Flick could see how pale and skinny he was — like someone who'd spent a lot of time practising magic in his bedroom but never actually left it to perform. Or find sunlight.

Harry nodded. "That's right. Ruby and I are used to working together. We do all our magic shows as a double act."

Ruby nodded enthusiastically, gazing up at her brother.

Christina smiled. "Are you confident you can win this?"

Ruby grabbed the microphone and pulled it towards her. "Of course we're going to win."

Someone in the audience cheered. Clearly a fan.

Christina firmly eased the microphone back, keen to maintain control. "Well, we love a confident contestant, don't we?"

Sensing that Ruby could be a nightmare to interview, she quickly moved on to Charlie, asking, "Do you think you can win?"

Charlie had curly brown hair and was wearing blue denim dungarees. He planted his feet apart confidently and said, "I'm going to win because I'm teaming up with Flick, and she's quite a good magician. I've seen some of her stuff on YouTube and it's actually almost professional. I have every confidence that together we have the skills to win this and go on to have a career where she is the magician and I can be her assistant, and we can have our own TV show, and spin-off movies, and an action figure franchise, and those little toys they put in Happy Meals, and a Las Vegas show, and the show will have lasers and perhaps a disappearing tiger or two. And after the interval, we will—"

Christina pulled the microphone away. "Whoa. Thanks for letting us know your plans."

Finally she came to Flick.

"Charlie here is obviously quite a fan," she said. "Are you as excited to work with him as he is with you?"

Flick looked at Charlie's idiotic smile. "Not really."

"Fabulous," Christina continued. "Let's hear it again for our four contestants." She turned towards the audience with a sweeping gesture. "So now it's time for you to enter the Fox's Den. Let the competition begin."

Fireworks exploded from either side of the stage and the back of the tent dropped away to reveal a brightly lit path leading towards the house.

