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Opening extract from

Circus Mirandus

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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Originally published by Dial/Penguin
Published by arrangement with Pippin Properties, Inc.
through Rights People, London

First published in Great Britain in 2015
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910002-57-5
eISBN 978-1-910002-58-2

CHAPTER ONE

Words

Four small words. That was all it took to set things in motion.

The words came from an upstairs room filled with the rustle of paper and the sweet stink of medicine. They came from the pen of an old man who coughed and wheezed with every breath. They came at the end of a very important letter, which said this:



To: The Lightbender
Care of: Circus Mirandus
I need to speak to you urgently. I hope you remember me even though it's been many years since I was

called to Circus Mirandus. Of course I have never forgotten you. My name is Ephraim Tuttle, and we met during the war, when I was a boy.
You promised me a miracle.
I don't know how I will get this message to you. I haven't heard even a whisper about the circus since I was a much younger man. But you made a promise, and I have believed through all these years that if I had need of you, you would come.

Here, the old man paused. He read over what he had written. His pen glinted in the yellow lamplight as he added the final line.

I need you now.

And at that moment, thousands of miles away in the tent of the Man Who Bends Light, a messenger woke up.



Like a Kettle

Micah Tuttle knew that most old ladies were pleasant enough. They knitted warm jumpers and baked cakes with chocolate icing and played old-fashioned card games at the town social hall. Sometimes one forgot to put in her false teeth, like Mrs Yolane from the post office, or she kept fourteen kooky cats, like Mrs Rochester from across the street. But even those two were basically chocolate cakes and warm jumpers on the inside.

Micah's great-aunt, Gertrudis, was not.

He washed a pink china teacup for the third time that Sunday afternoon while she loomed over him. She clucked her tongue, and he scrubbed the cup until he worried the painted roses might fade right off.

On the inside, Aunt Gertrudis was probably cough syrup.

She wore her dust-coloured hair twisted into a bun so tight it almost pulled her wrinkled skin smooth, and she starched her shirts until the collars were stiff enough to cut. She made black tea every day in a bright steel kettle. The tea was scalding and bitter, a lot like her, and she wouldn't let Micah add sugar because she said bad teeth ran in the family.

She also said that bad sense ran in the family, and by golly she'd see to it that Micah didn't inherit it.

Aunt Gertrudis had come to stay with them weeks ago, all the way from Arizona, to make sure that things were 'done correctly' while Grandpa Ephraim was sick. It wasn't supposed to be for long, but Micah's grandfather had got sicker and sicker. And Aunt Gertrudis had got more and more impossible.

'Don't assault the cup that way,' she snapped at him. 'I only wanted you to clean it properly for a change.'

The only thing that kept Micah from talking back was the knowledge that she'd keep him up to his elbows in chores for the rest of the day instead of letting him visit his grandfather. He hadn't been allowed to 'pester' Grandpa Ephraim since this morning, when he had hinted that he had something important to tell Micah.

'Something spectacular,' his grandfather had

whispered. ‘Something magical.’

Grandpa Ephraim had had a sparkle in his eyes that Micah recognized. And *magical* meant Circus Mirandus stories, which were one of Micah’s favourite things. Magical also meant Aunt Gertrudis had hustled Micah out of the room before his grandfather could actually tell him anything. She seemed to think that those stories were just the sort of bad sense Micah might inherit if she wasn’t careful.

Just a few more minutes until you can see him again.

He passed the teacup to his aunt as politely as he could and went to watch the kettle. While the water heated, the kettle popped like it was stretching out its joints. Soon, the little bird on top would start to whistle. That was Micah’s favourite part – the bird singing. He always looked forward to it.

A tendril of steam curled out of the bird’s silver mouth. The first faint whistle, when it came, reminded him of the last good days he’d had with Grandpa Ephraim before Aunt Gertrudis had arrived. They’d been building a tree house together. They had worked on it every afternoon, and Grandpa Ephraim had been whistling while they tied knots for the rope ladder. ‘Tuttle knots!’ he’d said when they finished. ‘You won’t find better ones anywhere.’

Which, Micah knew, was perfectly true.

Aunt Gertrudis was reaching for the kettle.

'You could leave it,' Micah said.

She didn't even glance at him as she jerked the kettle away from the heat. Micah strained his ears, trying to capture the last of the bird's song, but it was too late. All he heard was the *blub glub* of the boiling water inside the kettle, and in an instant, even that sound disappeared.

Aunt Gertrudis sploshed the tea bags up and down.

'It's just that I like to hear it whistle,' Micah said quietly.

'It's just that you like to waste time.'

Micah stared at the refrigerator so that he wouldn't have to look at her. The things that had once covered the fridge – a recipe for double chocolate brownies, alphabet magnets, a picture of an elephant Micah had drawn when he was seven – had all been papered over with medicine schedules and receipts and Aunt Gertrudis's calorie chart. The only evidence of Micah's existence was a sticky note, half hidden behind a copy of a prescription. It was written in his handwriting, and it said 'Inca Project 4 School'.

When he had first learnt that his grandfather's sister was coming, Micah had hoped she would be as wonderful as Grandpa Ephraim. He had hoped that she would like him. He had thought the house might be less lonely with someone else in it. But it turned

out that Aunt Gertrudis didn't like any of the things that Micah's grandfather liked, including ten-year-olds.

He took a deep breath and held it until his chest ached. *Something magical*, he reminded himself. *Maybe a new story. Maybe something happy.*

Happy sounded like somewhere very far away and hard to find these days.

Dr Simon had explained that Grandpa Ephraim couldn't get enough air. He didn't whistle any more. He stayed upstairs in bed all day long, and even though he still laughed sometimes, it sounded different. Like the kettle. *Blub glub.*

Micah knew what came next.