

## *Bedtime Stories*

CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS, OCTOBER 1902

Bailey spends much of the early part of this evening with Poppet and Widget exploring the Labyrinth. A dizzying network of chambers, interspersed with hallways containing mismatched doors. Rooms that spin and rooms with glowing chessboard floors. One hall is stacked high with suitcases. In another it is snowing.

"How is this possible?" Bailey asks, melting flakes of snow sticking to his coat.

In response, Poppet throws a snowball at him, and Widget only laughs.

While they traverse the Labyrinth, Widget tells the story of the Minotaur in such detail that Bailey keeps expecting to encounter the monster around every turn.

They reach a room resembling a large metal birdcage, with only darkness visible through the bars. The door in the floor that they entered through latches once it falls closed and cannot be opened again. There appears to be no other way to exit.

Widget ceases his narration as they investigate each silver bar, finding no hidden openings or cleverly disguised hinges. Poppet grows visibly distressed.

After a considerable amount of time spent trapped within the room, Bailey finds a key concealed in the seat of the swing in the middle of the cage. When he turns it, the swing itself

rises and the top of the cage opens, allowing them to climb out, escaping into a dimly lit temple guarded by an albino Sphinx.

While the temple has at least a dozen doors along its walls, Poppet immediately finds one that leads back out into the circus.

She still seems upset, but before Bailey can ask her if something is the matter, Widget checks his watch and finds they are late for their scheduled performance. The three of them agree to meet up again later, and the twins disappear into the crowd.

Bailey has seen the kittens so many times over the last few nights that he practically has their routine memorized, so he opts to explore by himself while he waits for them to be free again.

The particular path he chooses to wander down has no obvious doors, it is only a passageway between tents, endless stripes illuminated by flickering lights.

He notices an uneven spot in the alternating black and white.

Bailey finds a gap in the side of one of the tents. A split in the fabric, each edge dotted with silver grommets, and a black ribbon hangs just above his head, as though this opening was meant to be laced together to keep the tent firmly closed. He wonders if some circus member forgot to re-lace it.

Then he sees the tag. It is the size of a large postcard, attached to the black ribbon the way one might attach a gift card to a present. The tag hangs loosely a few feet off the ground. Bailey turns it over. The picture side shows a black-and-white etching of a child in a bed covered in fluffy pillows and a checked quilt, not in a nursery but under a star-sprinkled night sky. The opposite side is white, with elegant calligraphy in black ink that reads:



*Bedtime Stories*  
*Eventide Rhapsodies*  
*Anthologies of Memory*

*Please enter cautiously  
and feel free to open what is closed*

Bailey cannot tell if the tag refers to the break in the tent, or if it has been misplaced from some other tent. Most of the tents have prominently placed signs in painted wood, and entrances that are clearly defined or marked. This one seems as though it was not meant to be found. Other patrons pass by on their way from one part of the circus to another, too absorbed in their conversations to notice him contemplating a postcard-size tag by the side of a tent.

Tentatively, Bailey pulls the unlaced flaps apart, enough to peek inside to try to discern if this is indeed a separate circus attraction and not the back of the acrobat tent or some sort of storage area. He can make out only several twinkling lights and shapes that could possibly be furniture. Still unsure, he pulls the flaps apart enough to enter, stepping inside carefully per the instructions on the postcard, which proves wise as he walks directly into a table covered in jars and bottles and lidded bowls that rattle against one another. He stops, hopping not to knock anything over.

It is a long room, the size of a formal dining room, or maybe it only resembles a dining room because of the table, which stretches the length of the tent, though there is enough room to maneuver around it carefully. All of the jars and bottles are different. Some jars are simple glass mason jars, others are glazed ceramic jars or ornate frosted glass. Bottles for

wine or whiskey or perfume. There are silver-lidded sugar bowls and containers that look rather like urns. They appear to be in no particular pattern or order; they are simply strewn across the table. There are additional jars and bottles around the periphery of the room as well, with some on the ground and some on boxes and tall wooden bookshelves.

The only element that correlates the room with the picture on the tag is the ceiling. It is black and covered with tiny twinkling lights. The effect is almost identical to the upward view of the night sky from outside.

Bailey wonders how all of this might relate to a child in bed, or to bedtime stories, as he walks around the table.

He recalls what the tag said about opening things, wondering what could possibly be inside of all of these jars. Most of the clear-glass ones look empty. As he reaches the opposite side of the table, he picks one at random, a small round ceramic jar, glazed in black with a high shine and a lid topped with a round curl of a handle. He pulls the lid off and looks inside. A small wisp of smoke escapes, but other than that it is empty. As he peers inside he smells the smoke of a roaring fire, and a hint of snow and roasting chestnuts. Curious, he inhales deeply. There is the aroma of mulled wine and sugared candy, peppermint and pipe smoke. The crisp pine scent of a fir tree. The wax of dripping candles. He can almost feel the snow, the excitement, and the anticipation, the sugary taste of a striped candy. It is dizzying and wonderful and disturbing. After a few moments, he replaces the lid and puts the jar carefully back on the table.

He looks around at the jars and bottles, intrigued but hesitant to open another. He picks up a frosted-glass mason jar and unscrews the silver metal lid. This jar is not empty but contains a small amount of white sand which shifts on the bottom. The



scent that wafts from it is the unmistakable smell of the ocean, a bright summer day at the seashore. He can hear the sound of waves crashing against the sand, the cry of a seagull. There is something mysterious as well, something fantastical. The flag of a pirate ship on the far horizon, a mermaid's tail flipping out of sight behind a wave. The scent and the feeling are adventurous and exhilarating, with the salty tinge of a sea breeze.

Bailey closes the jar and the scent and the feeling fade, trapped back inside the glass with its handful of sand.

Next he chooses a bottle from a shelf on the wall, wondering if there is any distinction between jars and bottles on the table and the ones that surround it, if there is an indiscernible filing system for these curious containers.

This bottle is tall and thin, with a cork held in place by silver wire. He removes it with some difficulty, and it opens with a popping noise. There is something in the bottom of the bottle, but he cannot tell what it is. The scent wafting from the thin neck is bright and floral. A rosebush full of dew-dripping blossoms, the mossy smell of garden dirt. He feels as though he is walking down a garden path. There is the buzzing of bees and the melody of songbirds in the trees. He inhales more deeply, and there are other flowers along with the roses: lilies and irises and crocuses. The leaves of the trees are rustling in the soft warm wind, and the sound of someone else's footsteps falling not far from his own. The sensation of a cat brushing past his legs is so genuine that he looks down expecting to see it, but there is nothing on the floor of the tent but more jars and bottles. Bailey puts the cork back in the bottle and returns it to its shelf. Then he chooses another.

Tucked in the back of one of the shelves is a small bottle, rounded with a short neck and closed with a matching glass

stopper. He picks it up carefully. It is heavier than he had expected. Removing the stopper, he is confused, for at first the scent and the sensation do not change. Then comes the aroma of caramel, wafting on the crisp breeze of an autumn wind. The scent of wool and sweat makes him feel as though he is wearing a heavy coat, with the warmth of a scarf around his neck. There is the impression of people wearing masks. The smell of a bonfire mixes with the caramel. And then there is a shift, a movement in front of him. Something grey. A sharp pain in his chest. The sensation of falling. A sound like howling wind, or a screaming girl.

Bailey puts the stopper back, disturbed. Not wanting to end on such an experience, he places the strange little bottle back on its shelf and decides to choose one more before leaving to catch up with Poppet and Widget again.

He picks one of the boxes on the table this time, a polished-wood box with a swirling pattern etched into its lid. The inside of the box is lined with white silk. The scent is like incense, deep and spiced, and he can feel smoke curling around his head. It is hot, a dry desert air with pounding sun and powder-soft sand. His cheeks flush from the heat and from something else. The feel and sensation of something as luscious as silk falls across his skin in waves. There is music that he cannot discern. A pipe or a flute. And laughter, a high-pitched laugh that blends harmoniously with the music. The taste of something sweet but spicy on his tongue. The feeling is luxurious and lighthearted, but also secretive and sensual. He feels a hand on his shoulder and jumps in surprise, dropping the lid down on the box.

The sensation ends abruptly. Bailey stands alone in the tent, underneath the twinkling stars.