



Chapter 1

A Very Difficult Door

Small fingers gripped Tilda Hacker's elbow from behind, squeezing until painful shivers shot up to her shoulder. The eleven-year-old stopped climbing the bare staircase with a sigh, glancing down at the nervous face behind her.

Beneath the scruffy blonde haircut that might look more at home on a terrier, Charlie Hacker's blue eyes threw worried glances toward the narrow door looming at the top of the stairs. "What if the attic is haunted?"

"Don't be such a numpty!" Tilda peeled her younger

brother's slim fingers away from her arm and sent strands of sandy hair flying back across her shoulders with a flick. "Why would Dad send us to the attic if it was haunted?"

"Erm, because he doesn't believe in ghosts?" the ten-year-old reminded her. "And he's too busy to remember that I do!"

Tilda wrinkled her freckled nose as invisible specks of freshly-disturbed dust threatened to make her sneeze. It had been years since anyone had climbed the narrow staircase. She still felt pleased that her mother and father had trusted her to explore the attic and hunt for anything valuable. Perhaps they saw her potential to become a proper antiques dealer, just like them.

The Hackers had lived in the creaking rooms above their antique shop for almost three months now. According to letters that the postman still slipped through their door, the previous resident had been a man called Professor Howe. For reasons nobody knew, he'd left in a hurry over a year earlier, leaving behind all his possessions and stacks of unpaid bills.

Since buying the house at an auction, the family had spent every spare hour decluttering their new home,

room by room. Now, only the attic needed to be cleared.

Tilda leaned her slender frame against an uneven wall. "Don't you think we'd know by now if this house was haunted?"

"Ghosts don't exactly send you a friend request, Tils!" Charlie fired his older sister a look that seemed to challenge her IQ. "Besides, everyone knows York is England's most haunted city." The thought seemed to send a shiver dancing through Charlie's body. "Dad says there's a pub not far from us that once had an entire legion of Roman soldiers walk right through the cellar. They're probably up there right now, plotting how best to scare us both."

"Well, someone should tell them they needn't bother," Tilda said. "You seem to be doing a pretty good job of that all by yourself."

Tiring of Charlie's whimpering, she grabbed his wrist and restarted her ascent. "Come on – I'll go in first and check it out. I mean, how scary can a group of dead men in skirts be anyway?"



The unpolished brass door handle bit like ice against Tilda's palm. It refused to move.

"Good," cheered Charlie. "I'll tell Dad the lock is broken. He'll never fork out for the repair."

Refusing to give up so easily, Tilda grabbed the handle with both hands and heaved against it a second time. Determination drove her to keep trying, until beads of sweat were tickling her nose and her hand felt like it had just caught a champion tennis player's hardest serve.

Tilda nursed her hand and glared at the stubborn metalwork. This felt like stalemate.

"Told you it was broken," Charlie said triumphantly. "The only way you'll ever get through is by kicking the door down."

Tilda whirled around and snatched a handful of her brother's T-shirt. "Charlie Hacker, you're a genius!"

"Eh?"

"Gimme one of your trainers."

"What? No! They won't fit you."

"I'm not going to wear it, silly. I'm going to use it to get through the door."

Too impatient to wait, Tilda crouched and grasped hold of her brother's right shoe.

"Hey! Gerroff!"

"You can have it back in a minute. I just need something tough enough to tackle this handle."

"It's made of rubber and foam," bleated Charlie. "You're going to murder my trainer."

"These things are designed to run up mountains. I'm sure it can take a couple of thumps and wallops."

"You'll be getting the thumps and wallops if you ruin that thing. Do you know how much these cost?"

Showing how little she cared, Tilda slammed the shoe against the door handle with all the strength she could muster. The rubber sole hit its mark with a determined thud, then bounced away faster than a ricocheting bullet, throwing Tilda against the solid stone wall.

"That thing's not going to move, Tils," Charlie insisted.

"You're wasting your time."

"I'm not letting a door handle get the better of me."

Crouching like a resolute brawler, Tilda moved back towards the door. When the shoe struck the handle a second time, she cleverly used the rubber sole's recoil as fuel for her third and fourth strikes. Each blow grew more and more forceful, until...

"It moved!" she gasped. "It's working."

"Try telling my poor trainer that."

Further blows weakened the handle and excitement bubbled in her stomach, until eventually the handle gave a satisfying click.

As the door sprang ajar, a lip of unexpected yellow light poked through a gap no wider than a mouse's head. Slim fingers of dust coiled into the stairwell, closely followed by the scent of dried timber.

Tilda handed back her brother's shoe, sniffing the air like a curious puppy. "Well, it certainly doesn't smell haunted."

More than anything, the room smelled as if nobody had paid it much attention since the house had been constructed.

Apparently happy that his shoe had survived unscathed, Charlie slipped it back onto his foot before the room's scent caught his attention too.

"It smells like Grandad's woodworking shed." Charlie's nose flared above a slight smile. "I love the smell of wood."

Tilda raised an eyebrow. "So, you're coming in then?"

Charlie's smile vanished as he shuffled awkwardly. "Yeah! Of course! I just need a minute to let my... erm... shoe recover. The stressed foam could give way at any time and snap my ankle!"

Tilda gave him a begrudging nod; in her younger brother's database of excuses, that was certainly one of his best.

When she gently eased the door open, reluctant hinges shrieked like startled seagulls. If she hadn't been so excited by the thought of what hidden treasures awaited her, Tilda might have wondered how long it

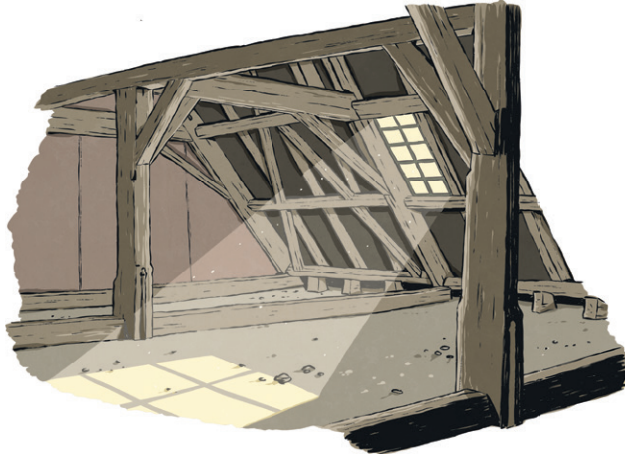
had been since the door had moved.

The combination of light and dust blinded her for a moment as her feet landed on bare floorboards. Warmth she hadn't expected wrapped itself around her like welcoming arms.

Once acclimatised to the room's unexpected brightness, Tilda could hardly believe the sight that greeted her.

The attic stretched across the entire length and width of the building; as Tilda's gaze bounced from one corner to the next, she was shocked to see that every centimetre of space was filled with exactly the same thing...

Nothing.



Chapter 2

Disappointed by Dust

Tilda felt robbed – as if one of the spectres Charlie so feared had crept from behind the bare rafters and made off with all of her hopes.

The original floorboards were almost hidden beneath a toe-deep dusty carpet. Freshly-disturbed streams of dust tumbled like flour from the roughly-sawn ceiling beams and the sloping bare walls. Disappointment prized a sigh from Tilda's lips as her shoulders drooped. The prospect of discovering the previous occupant's forgotten possessions and secrets had actually been quite exciting. Now, the thought of returning to her parents empty-handed seemed to land a large stone in the bottom of

her stomach.

"Any sign of ghosts?" Charlie called from the stairway behind her.

"Not unless they're hiding beneath all this dirt."

"Eh?" Charlie poked his head around the door. "Ah-chooo!" His sneeze sent a mini ash cloud rolling across the walls. "It's empty!" he said.

He hustled past her, striding out into the middle of the room. Thick shafts of bright yellow sunshine flooded through large skylights.

"How can this room be empty?" Unlike Tilda, Charlie had hoped to find piles of junk and bric-a-brac that he could sell online. "The rest of the house was filled with clutter. This doesn't make sense."

Tilda shrugged as she moved to explore an empty space in the farthest corner of the attic. There were no signs that the room had ever been used. "Maybe the stairs were too steep for Professor Howe."

"Are you kidding? Mum said Professor Howe was only in his early forties," Charlie reminded her, "and he was

a treasure hunter, remember? I doubt he'd let a single set of stairs stand in his way."

"Well, maybe he just didn't like heights."

Charlie continued to explore the room, slapping ceiling beams, stamping on floorboards and tapping the walls.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh!" Charlie pressed an ear to the wall, drumming against the painted plaster. "I'm checking for hidden panels."

Groaning at the ten-year-old's stupidity, Tilda clasped her hands to her hips. "Charlie, why would anybo-

"Hah! Found something!"

Her brother seemed to be locked in a corner of the room, hunched like a beggar. His head was so still that it might have been glued to the wall itself. Only the index finger of his left hand moved, tapping gently.

"There's definitely something here."

"Yeah, it's called the wall!"

"No, no! Really!" With his other hand, Charlie beckoned his sister towards him. "There's something behind this plasterboard."

Slowed by doubt, Tilda moved to join her finger-tapping brother.

"It sounds hollow," Charlie told her, shuffling to his left to make room. "Listen for yourself."

Tilda gave Charlie a weary glance as she pushed her ear against the thinly-painted plaster.

"Listen!"

Charlie tapped a section of wall high above her head. It sounded flat and solid.

When Charlie tapped again, this time slightly lower, Tilda heard an identical sound.

"It's just a normal wall, Charlie."

"Keep listening."

When Charlie tapped just centimetres from his sister's head, the difference was immediate. Tilda jerked away

from the wall, as if she had just been electrocuted.

“You heard it, right?” asked Charlie. “It sounds hollow.”

Tilda nodded. Her brother was correct. That didn’t happen often!

“Maybe there’s something hidden behind it.” Charlie suggested. “We need to find out.”

“But it’s a solid wall,” Tilda reminded him. “We can’t just break through it.”

They both took a time-out, scratching their heads. Each studied the seemingly ordinary wall in front of them. Tilda scanned its length and breadth, searching for any flaws or joins that might indicate a doorway.

Taking a more hands-on approach, Charlie dropped to his knees and began tapping the floorboards nearest the wall.

When he looked back towards his sister, his excited smile told Tilda that the hunt for treasure was back on.

“We were looking in the wrong place. See!”

Charlie’s small fingers hooked themselves around an almost invisible groove in the wood, prizing a one-metre-square section of floorboards up off the ground.

Tilda gasped, peering down into a thin shaft containing a narrow ladder. “A trapdoor!”

Oddly, the rungs of the wooden ladder were angled from the floor towards the wall. Anyone climbing down them would have to duck to avoid striking the top half of their body against hard plaster.

Charlie thrust his head and shoulders into the space, twisting so he could peer beneath and behind the wall.

“There’s a small room behind the wall,” his voice sounded muffled and distant. “And this one’s not empty!”



Chapter 3

Trapdoor Treasure Trove

The day had just become way more interesting, sending Tilda's emotions on a rollercoaster ride from deep disappointment back to white-knuckle excitement.

Following her brother, Tilda was surprised to find that the underfloor shaft actually contained a second ladder. It was identical in size to the first but angled in the opposite direction, up towards the hidden room.

Even before she began climbing the second set of rungs, Tilda knew that the secret room would be nothing like the attic. She could smell the difference.

The air was thick with the scent of history. The antique shop below them had a similar smell: occasional wafts of slowly-decaying wood and fabrics, ancient fermenting polish and water-damaged paper gradually decomposing. Yet those smells were modern compared with the cocktail of odours that seemed to form a barrier between the secret room and the rest of the world. This was the scent of ancient artefacts, spewing fragrances that didn't belong in the twenty-first century.

"You have got to see this." Charlie had already scaled

the second ladder and was now kneeling on the floor of the secret room. "It's like some kind of vault."

Excitement sent giddy butterflies fluttering in Tilda's stomach. As she scrabbled to join her brother, the sights that greeted her struck like a freeze-ray.

Charlie had been wrong. This wasn't a vault at all. This was more like a treasure chamber.

"Wow!"

"Told you," Charlie giggled. "This lot must be worth a fortune!"

The room itself was larger than Tilda had expected, perhaps even longer and wider than the family's garage. Yet it was so jam-packed with clutter that there was barely enough room for two people.

A small desk and chair had been pushed into one corner, piled high with ledgers and thick scrolls. Wooden trunks and chests, mostly studded with iron bands and rivets, were stacked in the remaining corners. Yet it was the room's walls that entranced Tilda. They were a kaleidoscope of treasures, reaching forward from centuries past to create the most incredible mural.

Her eyes could barely take it all in; beautiful portraits and landscape paintings hung in carved golden frames across one entire surface. Opposite, chainmail shirts, leather jerkins and bronze chest plates watched from the wall like soldiers waiting for battle. Another wall housed heaving shelves piled high with leather-bound books, wax-sealed folders wrapped in ribbon and stacks of what looked like parchment.

"It's incredible." Tilda's heart was racing so hard that she thought it might tear a hole through her chest. Perhaps this was this how Howard Carter felt when he crashed through the wall of Tutankhamun's tomb.

Above her, Charlie plucked a musket from a ceiling hook and peered down its barrel.

"Do you think this thing is loaded?"

Tilda snatched it from him and clambered up into the room. The weapon felt heavy in her hand; the wooden stock had the shape and smoothness that only real fingers could forge.

"We shouldn't touch any of these things," Tilda said, carefully placing the musket back onto its hook. Beside it, a collection of sheathed swords and rifles

hung like macabre stalactites.

“But they’re ours now,” Charlie pointed out. “Mum and Dad bought the house and all its contents – and this looks a lot like contents to me.”

“But they don’t belong here,” Tilda warned him. “This kind of stuff should be in a museum. This is real history.”

“Do you think it was Professor Howe’s personal collection?”

“Dunno. Tilda squeezed past her brother, heading for the desk and chair. For some reason, she couldn’t shake the feeling they were trespassing. “Maybe there’s something over here that can tell us more.”

Seated at the small desk, Tilda carefully began searching the stacks of papers and ledgers for some kind of clue. She tried not to think about the items she was touching. Most were handwritten in ink, scratched across hard paper that must have been made centuries earlier. Some of the ledgers appeared even older, written in languages she couldn’t even begin to decode. Yet one item stood out like a rose in a bed of dandelions: a journal so new it almost glowed.

When she opened it up and began to read the neatly-arranged handwriting, her jaw slowly dropped open.

“What is it?” Charlie leaned over his sister’s shoulder. “What does it say?”

Tilda shook her head; this certainly wasn’t what she had expected to find.

“Either he was writing some kind of fantasy novel, or Professor Howe had gone a bit bonkers.”

As she ventured deeper and deeper into the professor’s journal, the content became stranger and stranger.

“None of this makes sense... he’s talking about hunting for treasure by going back in time. Look,” she jabbed at a page of writing. “He mentions the musket you showed me... says he stole it from a soldier during the English civil war.”

She turned back a few pages and next pointed to a paragraph of text. “And here, he says one of those duelling swords was given to him as a gift by a fifteenth-century nobleman.”

Charlie sniggered. “Maybe he didn’t disappear at all.

Maybe he got a job as a Hollywood script writer... sounds like it would make an awesome sci-fi movie."

Tilda turned through more of the journal's pages, causing a loose sheet to drop onto the floor.

Charlie stooped to pluck it off the ground. "Hey, what's this?"

They both stared at a strip of tightly-folded paper. Two words were written neatly across the front: **ACCESS GATES.**

"Why would Professor Howe have a leaflet about gates?" Charlie wondered. "This house doesn't even have a garden."

Tilda snatched the leaflet from her brother. "Gate is just another word for a door, silly. Ancient cities like York had doors around the city walls to keep people out. They called them gates."

"Ah, I see. So that's why you get places like Micklegate and Fishergate?"

"Exactly!" Tilda nodded. "Maybe this is just a map of all those ancient gates."

She gently cleared an area of space on the desktop and slowly unfolded the leaflet. Section by section, a map showing the streets of York emerged. Yet this wasn't quite the kind of map Tilda had expected to see. Not one of the city's famous gates was included.

Instead, the detailed sketch showed York's modern-day streets and roads, many leading to and from a collection of historic sites: the medieval Minster; Viking encampments; the first Roman settlements; a Norman garrison; even places Tudor kings had once called home.

The map contained a score of different locations, each marked and identified by its own neatly-drawn door. Beside many of these doors sat a series of dates and tiny icons in the shape of a key. One or two even had the universally recognised sign for danger – a skull and crossbones.

"What do you think it means?" Charlie asked.

Tilda kept gazing at the map, looking from one door to the next, hoping to see a pattern. Finally, she spotted something she recognised.

Turning back to the professor's journal, she flicked through

its pages until she found the one she was looking for.

As her finger pressed against a date scribbled on the map, she compared it to the one at the top of the journal page. They matched!

She checked several more, finding identical matches too. Suddenly, Tilda understood how the two documents worked together. The buzz of solving that particular puzzle made her wonder if she was perhaps more suited to a career as a detective than an antiques dealer.

"This can't be possible," she told Charlie. "It has to be made up."

Her brother's puzzled expression prompted more explanation.

"These dates all match the detailed entries in the professor's journal. And each entry talks about a single trip he made on that day."

Now Charlie looked even more puzzled. "What's so unusual about that? Everyone takes trips."

"Not trips like these," Tilda insisted. "These are trips back in time."