



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 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."