



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.

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After reading the chapter:

- 1 What are the names of the two children?
- 2 Why does Tilda want to investigate the secret room?
- 3 Why doesn't Charlie want to investigate the secret room?
- 4 What words would you use to describe the characters?
- 5 Which character are you most like?

