



## 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 bustled 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 2: Disappointed by Dust

After reading the chapter:

- 1 What had Charlie hoped to find?
- 2 Why did Tilda gasp?
- 3 Who went into the secret room first?
- 4 What do you think the mystery room contains?
- 5 What do you predict the children will do next?

