

Chapter 4

An Impossible Possibility

Tilda double-checked more than twenty dates, each time finding a corresponding entry in the professor's journal. The entries themselves were incredibly detailed, not only describing the people its owner had allegedly met and a number of significant historic events, but also containing a reference to a specific artefact and its position in the room.

Finally, she turned to a new page and scanned the text. "Back wall... second shelf from the left... fourth from the floor."

Following his sister's instructions, Charlie scuttled

across the small room and navigated the contents of the bookcase. "Got it!"

"Seventh book from the left should be a slim black diary."

Charlie counted across the shelf until his finger dropped onto a book that matched Tilda's description. "What is it this time?"

Tilda leaned back against the chair and exhaled loudly. She refused to believe what the professor's note was claiming. "Shakespeare's pocket book."

Charlie snatched his finger back as if he'd just been bitten. "The famous play-writing guy?"

Tilda closed the journal with a thud. "It can't be true."

Charlie gazed around the room. His eyes seemed to sparkle brighter than the various treasures. "These things all seem genuine enough, Tils. Why would the professor go to all the trouble of forging everything?"

"But time travel isn't possible!" Tilda swung the chair around until she was facing the room. "Everyone knows that."

"Everyone except the professor, maybe?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" This was all beginning to make Tilda's head hurt. "How would he go back in time? There's not one single mention of a time machine."

Charlie thought for a moment. "Perhaps he used something else."

Tilda snorted. "Like what, a magic potion?"

Charlie pointed to a section of wall behind his sister's head. "He might have used one of those."



So much for her aspiring to become a detective; Tilda couldn't believe that she had missed something so obvious.

The two children stood staring at the large square cork board that had been screwed to the wall. A collection of tiny leather pouches hung from pins, each with a handwritten label showing various periods of time. One hook read **Brigantes**; another read **World War Two**.

Between those was every significant period in York's long and varied history.

"What do you think they are?" Charlie asked.

Every sensible gene in Tilda's body resisted what she was about to say next. "Maybe they're keys to open something like a time door."

Charlie pointed to an empty pin beneath a label reading **Normans**. "Why is one missing?"

Both children stared at the empty pin. Neither dared to say what they were each thinking.

Tilda remembered seeing a skull and crossbones sign scribbled beside the Normans' door on Professor Howe's map. Something told her that was significant.

Suddenly feeling a mixture of enthusiasm and fear, she reached out towards the tiny pouches, plucking off the one labelled **Romans**. It felt unexpectedly light and the fabric was more delicate than it looked. When she bounced it on her palm, it jangled softly.

Like every bag, this one was sealed shut by a tight knot. After gently working the knot loose, Tilda

tipped the contents out onto her palm.

Three thin, golden coins danced across her skin, plus a small golden signet ring which sparkled in the dusty light. Charlie reached out and plucked it from his sister's palm. Both children stared down with admiring eyes at the beautifully-fashioned golden band. What really caught their attention, though, was the face of a man which had been cut into the precious stone on top of the band, and cold eyes scowled up at Tilda with a look that sent contempt reaching through history.

"They look old," Charlie observed, "and valuable."

Tilda nodded. "I think they're genuine Roman coins. And that ring looks like it could be worth a fortune. I wonder how the Professor got his hands on all this stuff?"

"Check another bag," her brother urged.

When she emptied the bag marked **Vikings**, more coins rolled onto her palm. These were much plainer, and seemed to be made from less precious metals.

Checking the bags labelled **Tudors** and **Stuarts** confirmed that each little pouch contained the same contents: ancient money and little artefacts.

Charlie's brow creased like paper as he rubbed his chin. "The map shows the symbol of a key next to every door. How can we use money that is impossible to spend as a way to open a door? Is it some kind of puzzle?"

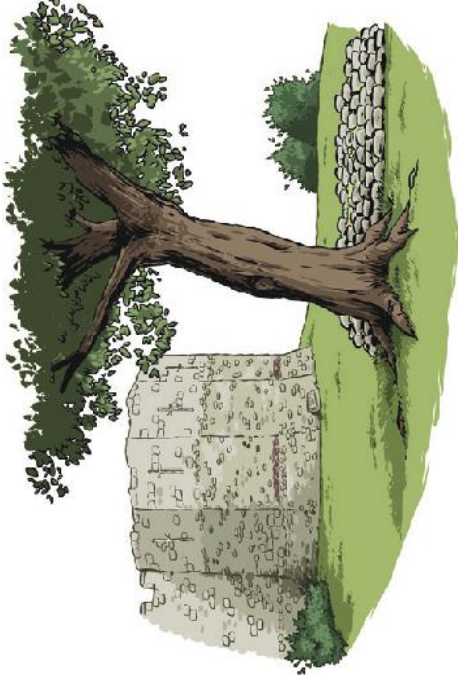
Tilda reached for the professor's journal. Instinct was telling her that the solution to this conundrum had to lie within its pages.

Maybe she was destined to be a detective after all – the answer stared up at her from the bottom of the very first page.

Tilda felt her cheeks flush with giddiness as she read the professor's words out loud.

"Although each time door is invisible to the naked eye, I have found that they can be opened and travelled through by anyone possessing the right historical artefact." Her finger trembled almost as much as her voice as she traced the words. "For a treasure hunter with a sense of adventure, these historic items are actually keys to the most incredible experiences imaginable."

When she glanced up from the journal, she found her brother hopping with glee. "We've got to see if we can open one of those doors!"



Chapter 5

A Tree with Secrets

"This wasn't exactly what I had in mind," grumbled Tilda, staring at her reflection in the antique shop's full-length mirror. "If any of my classmates see me in this, I'll never live it down."

Charlie shuffled beside his sister and gazed back at his own reflection. His smirk and sparkling eyes suggested that he thought they both looked amazing – just like the pictures of Roman peasants that Tilda had found online earlier.

He wiggled uncomfortably, hitching his breeches up as high as they would go. They were actually made from

a pair of his mother's thick winter tights, but it was the best they'd been able to find. One of his father's old linen shirts hung down to his knees, fastened around his waist by a plain leather belt. Perched on a shoe rack near the door, a pair of tatty brown gardening sandals would complete the look.

Tilda's outfit was almost identical, although she had swapped tights for knee-length socks and her long hair was tied neatly in a braid. Despite never having had much of an interest in fashion, she still knew she was definitely not rocking the peasant look.

They'd already decided to explore the location marked Roman Doorway. It hadn't been a difficult decision. According to the professor's map, the time door was just a few streets from their parents' shop, right beside the remains of an old Roman tower which was popular with out-of-town visitors.

"We need to make sure we blend in," Charlie reminded his older sister. "This way, we can have a look around without attracting any unwanted attention."

"Cool your jets, Charlie Hacker," she urged. "We don't even know if the doors work yet. There's still a chance Professor Howe could have made this all up."

Ignoring his sister's reservations, Charlie slipped both feet into a tatty pair of leather sandals and checked the time on his wristwatch.

"Hey, you can't wear that," Tilda pointed out, unbuckling her own timepiece. "Wristwatches weren't invented until 1868."

"Why, what year are we going back to?"

She fought hard not to laugh at her brother's enthusiastic naivety. He'd bought into the professor's writing so much that discovering it was all make-believe would likely make him miserable for weeks.

Feeling a little sorry for him, Tilda decided to play along. "If the dates on the coins are accurate, we'll probably find ourselves in the second or third century."

"Wow!" Charlie almost danced out of his sandals. "Can you believe we're actually about to do this?"

"Come on," Tilda rolled her gaze towards the ceiling as she shoved her brother towards the antique shop's back door. "Let's get this over with."



In almost every other town or city in the country, two children dressed as Roman peasants would have caused quite a stir. Yet as both Hackers scurried through narrow streets leading to the ruins of York's famous Multangular Tower, they hardly earned a second glance.

Blending in with the army of costume-wearing guides employed to lead tourists around the city's landmarks made Tilda and Charlie feel like they were invisible. They also had the freedom to search for Professor Howe's hidden time door, completely undisturbed.

"It's got to be here somewhere," said Charlie. They'd been searching the grounds around the ruins for almost twenty minutes, and both children peered hard at a now familiar spot on the professor's map.

According to the hand-sketched coordinates, the third-century time door should have been directly in front of them. Instead, all Charlie could see was the gnarled trunk of an old oak tree.

"It can't be this stupid tree," he pointed out. "It wouldn't even have been an acorn at the time the Romans were here."

Tilda peered down at the map sat perched on the lid of a litter bin, then pointed to the building behind her brother. "The museum building is there..."

Next, she gestured to an ancient angular ruin rising from the ground.

"...the remains of the Roman tower are there..."

Finally, she nodded towards the stretch of Roman wall half-hidden behind the tree.

"...and what's left of the Emperor's villa garden is there. So if this map is to be believed, we should be able to see the doorway right here."

"But it's a tree," Charlie grumbled. "Not a door."

As she'd originally feared, it was beginning to look as if the map and the little bag of Roman coins were all part of Professor Howe's elaborate fantasy. Tilda suddenly felt foolish for even believing it could be possible.

Eleven-year-old girls were supposed to be much smarter than that.

“Wait,” Charlie barked. “What if we’re in the right place, but we’re looking for the wrong thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if the door isn’t a door at all? What if it’s disguised as something else? Or even hidden?” He paused, nibbling his lip as if he was reluctant to say what was really on his mind. “Or what if it’s waiting for us to do something first?”

Tilda couldn’t remember reading anything about that in the professor’s journal. Yet as her newly-found detective’s instinct kicked into overdrive, she found herself wondering if the map itself held any further clues.

The faded ink and bleached paper suggested that the map itself had been used quite a lot. Some parts were smudged. Others housed smears where raindrops had made the ink run. Near the Roman door sketch, Tilda’s focus landed on a patch of paper that looked like it might be missing a word. Something had been erased.

Fueled by a sudden idea, she lifted the map up into the air, letting the afternoon’s sunlight bathe the paper.

“That’s interesting.” Tilda wrinkled her forehead. “I think another word was once written next to the image of the door.”

“A magic word?” Hope amplified Charlie’s words. “Like ‘open sesame’? Or ‘abracadabra’?”

“Shhhh!”

Tilda shook her head as she strained to make out the weak indentations now visible in the sunlight. Initially, they’d resembled little more than a collection of random lines and curves. Yet as she continued to stare, her eyes began to recognise a pattern. First just a single letter. Then another. Until...

“Forfeit!”

“What?”

Tilda jabbed the spot on the map. “The hidden word – it says forfeit.”

“Four feet?” Charlie glanced down at his own feet, as

if he was actually counting them.

“Dogs have got four feet. Maybe we need to find –”

“Not four feet,” Tilda giggled. “Forfeit – you know, as in give up, surrender, lose.”

Charlie stopped looking for dogs to abduct. “Why would it tell us to give up?”

“Perhaps it’s a hidden message,” Tilda suggested. She knew this wasn’t the news her brother wanted to hear. “Maybe it’s telling us we’re wasting our time.”

Charlie raised a hand to silence his sister. “It’s gotta mean something else.”

“But that’s what a forfeit is, Charlie... to give something up.”

Her brother refused to accept that. “What about when we play board games with Dad?”

“You always cheat,” Tilda reminded him.

“No, no, not that!” Charlie paced back and forth in front of the tree. “When we do something wrong, Dad

makes us pay a forfeit. What if we have to pay to open the door? Maybe that’s what the money is for!”

Although common sense told her this was probably just one big waste of time, Tilda pulled the professor’s cloth pouch from a small purse strapped to her belt.

She handed one of the coins to her brother and sighed. “Be careful – it’s probably quite valuable.”

Charlie stared at the coin, then at the tree, then back at the coin. “What should I do with it?”

In the video games Tilda sometimes played, there was always an enchanted keyhole somewhere unexpected. “Let’s check for a secret slot concealed in the bark, or the roots?”

Five minutes of patting and probing drew a blank. The tree was just a tree.

Tilda sat back onto the grass, propping herself up with both elbows. Sunshine caressed her face.

“Maybe we should go home.”

“No chance!” her brother insisted.

“There’s something here – I can feel it.”

“Well, all I can feel is my stomach rumbling,” Tilda grumbled. “I missed lunch.”

“The map lied!” Charlie growled. “I can’t believe it.”

“At least we still have the professor’s hoard,” Tilda tried to lift his spirits. “And if those coins and the ring are genuine, Mum and Dad can sell them for hundreds of pounds – maybe thousands.”

Charlie was too annoyed and disappointed to care. His face flushed the colour of a sunset as anger brewed.

“Stupid tree! Stupid map! Stupid coins!”

Perhaps if Tilda hadn’t been enjoying the sun’s warmth quite as much, she would have been quick enough to stop Charlie. Yet by the time she realised what her brother was about to do, it was already too late.

“No Charlie, don’t...”

The tiny Roman coin left her brother’s fingers like a catapulted stone, fuelled by his frustration and anger. It struck the bark, then ricocheted left towards the

Roman wall. Both children watched it spin towards the ancient stonework and then... it vanished!

“Did you see that?” Charlie gasped. “It passed straight through.”

Tilda refused to believe her eyes. Surely, that hadn’t just happened.

“Gimme another coin!” Charlie squealed.

This time, he launched the coin straight at the wall. Just like the first, it passed right through solid stone.

“Quick, Tils,” Charlie thrust his hand forward. “Another.”

“Wait, it’s the last one.”

“It’s all I need.”

Charlie snatched the last coin and the signet ring from his sister’s hand and stepped towards the wall. Suddenly feeling scared, Tilda reached to grab hold of her brother’s shirt. But it was already too late.

Charlie had reached the wall and pushed the tiny

silver coin towards the eroded stone. This time it wasn't just the coin that vanished. So did Charlie's hand, followed quickly by his arm and shoulder.

Tilda's jaw dropped open as she watched the wall swallow her brother whole!

Chapter 6

Rumbled by Romans

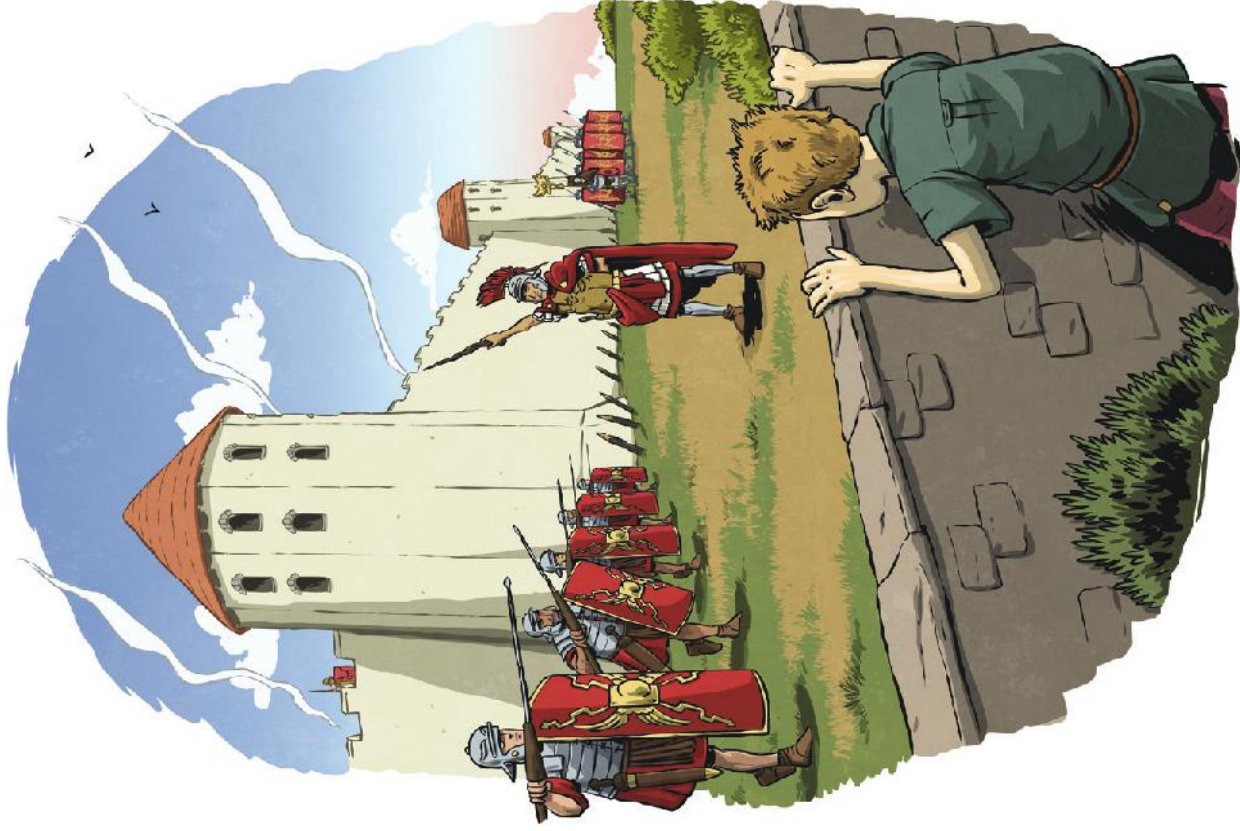
Charlie had expected his skull to crash against Roman wall, yet now he found himself lying on his back staring at a clear blue sky.

Stranger still, the park, which had been filled with milling tourists and happy picnickers just moments before, was now nowhere to be seen.

Instead, Charlie was alone behind the wall, beyond which sat a large and impressive stone fortress, not the ruin he had seen seconds earlier.

His throat felt dry and rougher than sandpaper as he picked up the two coins he'd thrown moments earlier. As he climbed to his feet, he tucked the coins and the ring into his sock for safekeeping. Now stretching up onto his tiptoes, he peered over the wall towards the fortress.

The stone building looked familiar, especially the position of its angled walls. Yet everything else about the stone fortress looked wrong. It seemed new! And that wasn't the only thing that seemed out of place. The group of Roman soldiers gathered by the door definitely shouldn't have been there.



Charlie ducked back behind the wall, hardly daring to breathe. Had he really just seen Roman soldiers?

A second glance confirmed that he had, yet these men looked nothing like the badly-dressed tour guides that he was used to seeing. This group looked like the real thing, bulging with threatening muscles, dressed head to foot in full iron and leather armour, and carrying huge swords and javelins.

Charlie pressed himself flat against the stonework, suddenly feeling a mix of terror and excitement. After all, if he had just seen Roman soldiers, that could only mean one thing: he really had managed to travel back in time.

Now fizzing with curiosity, Charlie scanned his surroundings. York as he knew it had vanished. Instead, he was sitting in what appeared to be a farmer's meadow and a short distance away sat a small cluster of cone-shaped huts. Brown smoke snaked from the tip of thickly-thatched roofs and the walls looked like they were made from woven wood and dirt.

That wasn't the only difference. This version of York was so quiet. There was no rumble of car engines, no

mobile phones chirping, nor a single siren or vehicle alarm. In fact, the loudest sound Charlie could hear was the tweet of songbirds coming from a nearby hedgerow.

Yet what Charlie noticed most of all were the smells. No longer filled with the aroma of vehicle fumes and city litter, this version of York stank more like a farmyard with a major case of blocked drains.

In an instant, none of that mattered any more. Instead, Charlie's attention was seized by the sounds of jeering and shouting coming from behind the wall.

Summoning as much courage as he could, he slowly poked his head back over the wall and peered back towards the fortress.

The troop of Roman soldiers had now split into two groups. Nearest the fortress, a dozen Romans hacked and parried with their swords and javelins, clearly practising a series of well-rehearsed battle moves. Charlie wondered how the Romans had ever been defeated; this lot would scare the life out of even the toughest WWE wrestlers.

Much closer to him was a second cluster of soldiers. These were every bit as muscular and just as heavily

armed, but far more terrifying because right now, they were looking straight at Charlie Hacker.



The largest and most intimidating of the soldiers used the glinting tip of his javelin to point towards the wall.

“Hey! Peasant! What do you think you’re doing there?” Charlie quickly ducked back behind the wall, but it was too late; the clattering of armour and scuffing of boots told him that the soldiers were heading his way. And stomach-churning instinct told him that these were definitely not tour guides.

Thinking quickly and still gripping one of the coins in his fist, Charlie found what he hoped was the area of wall he’d travelled through. As the sound of onrushing soldiers became louder, he threw himself at the stone.

When skin and bone hits something as solid as stone, there’s only one winner – and it wasn’t Charlie. He could feel his muscles already beginning to bruise as he landed in a heap. Although still dazed, he realised why the portal hadn’t worked. The ‘magical’ doorway

was on the other side of this wall – and that's where the Roman soldiers were. He was hoping he still had time to clamber over the wall and slip back through the portal when a powerfully-thrown javelin landed beside him.

One half of his brain screamed at him to run. The other half urged him to stay still, telling him that none of this was real, and that he was perfectly safe. Unfortunately, Charlie believed the wrong half.

"I've gorrin!" growled a voice as shovel-sized hands snatched Charlie's shirt.

Finally feeling in control of his limbs, Charlie spun away, twisting for all he was worth as the collar of his father's cheap shirt slipped from the man's grasp.

Another soldier lunged towards him, fingers outstretched, tearing a huge hole through his mother's winter tights. More hands grabbed hold of Charlie's arms, lifting him into the air. He could smell the soldiers' stale sweat and hear their angry grunts as he was dragged over the stone wall like some kind of hunting trophy.

His brief journey ended painfully as he was slammed onto the ground. Large feet wearing even larger

sandals kicked and stamped, sending Charlie rolling across the ground.

Any minute now, a pair of unfriendly hands would seize him by the hair or by the throat. He closed his eyes and screamed, desperately trying to avoid the blows by rolling over and over until he reached the wall.