

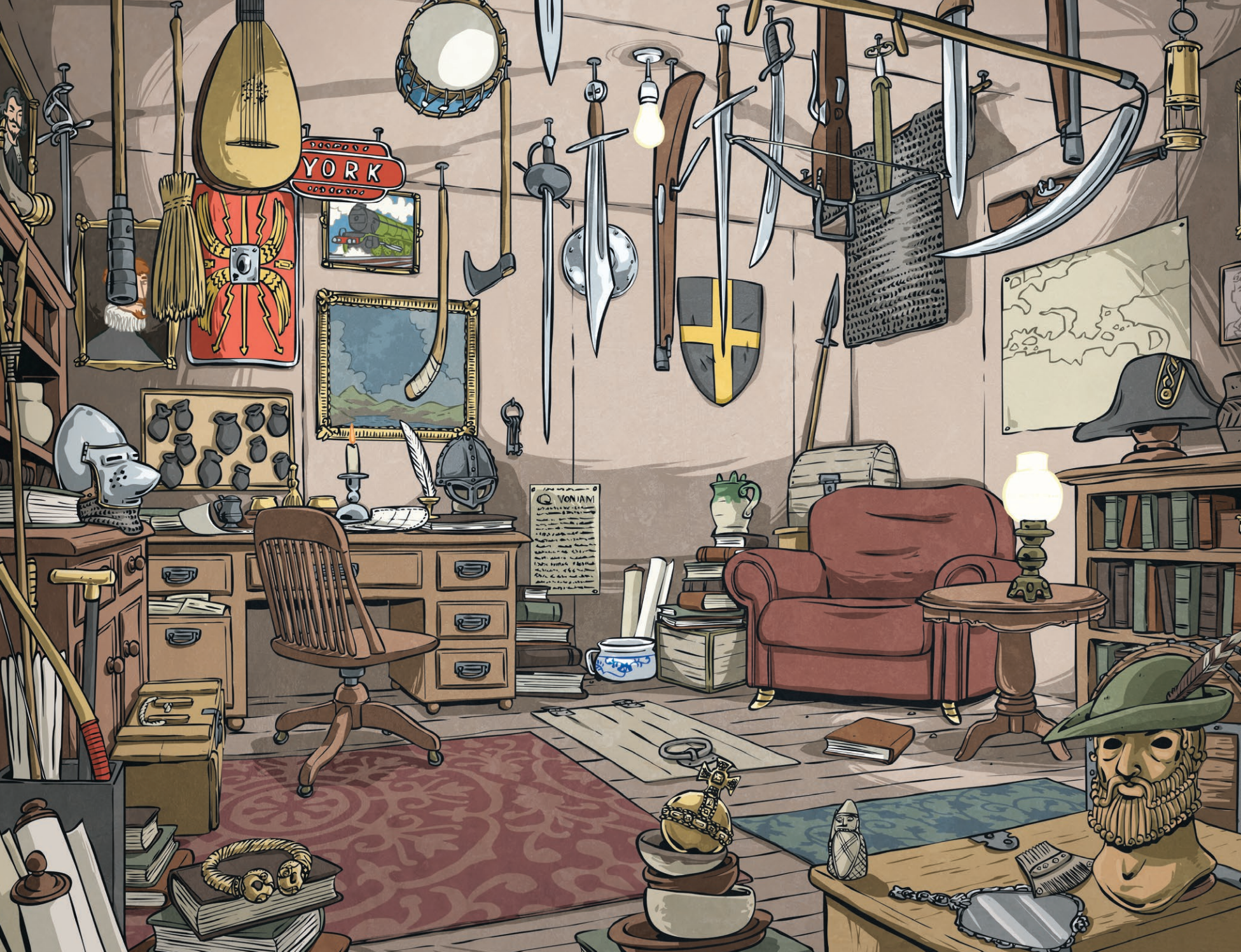
A TWINKL ORIGINAL

# HISTORY HACKERS



VICTORIAN VENTURE

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**VICTORIAN VENTURE**

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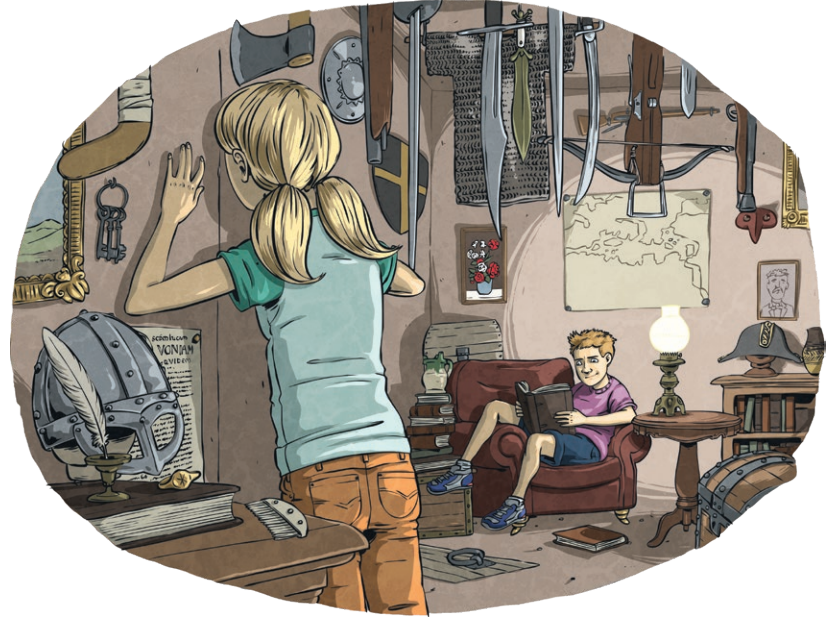
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## Chapter One

### Charlie's Dare

"He's going to find us eventually."

Ten-year-old Charlie Hacker muffled his voice until his words were barely louder than a mouse's sneeze. "We can't keep this kind of thing a secret forever."

At eleven years old, Tilda was used to ignoring her brother. Charlie's scruffy-haired head was so crammed with worries and questions that they seemed to spill

from his mouth like an avalanche. Feeding him one answer simply led to the demand for another, so Tilda adopted a strategy of silence – it was far less exhausting.

Today, though, there was a much more pressing reason to stay silent: both children were hiding.

“What if he covers the door with one of those boxes?” Charlie fretted. “We’ll be locked in here forever.”

“Will you *please* be quiet?!” Tilda’s eyes narrowed as she hissed over her shoulder. “The only way Dad’s going to find out about this place is if he hears you blabbering.”

Wearing the startled look of somebody who had just been slapped, Charlie poked his tongue out before skulking to the opposite corner of the hidden room. He weaved his way through the collection of swords and muskets that hung from the ceiling like a macabre chandelier, then folded his slim frame into a leather armchair which had seen better days.

“Thank you!” Tilda blew a silent sigh of exasperation before pressing her face back against the cold surface of the wall. With one blue eye clamped tightly shut,

she used the other to peer through a tiny hole in the plasterboard.

The hole was only a few millimetres wide but still gave her a full view of the attic, where her father continued to stack storage boxes against the room’s far wall. Over the last few weeks, he had slowly transferred the contents of his office into the attic. What had previously been a redundant room, filled with little more than a year’s collection of dust, was now beginning to resemble a scale model of New York City’s skyline.

Tilda was pleased when her father heaved a final box onto a rather precarious-looking stack and then disappeared down the narrow flight of stairs into the family’s antique shop below.

“He’s gone,” she told Charlie. “We can relax.”

Her brother was flicking through one of several handwritten manuscripts that usually sat on a shelf above the writing desk. The sharp and exaggerated flick that he was giving each delicate page told Tilda that he was still sulking.

"Oh, it's OK to speak now, is it?" Slamming the book shut with a thud, Charlie glared at his sister through wounded blue eyes. "You're not the boss of me, Tils."

Tilda fought the urge to snatch the book from her brother's hands. Faded gold lettering on the leather spine showed that it had once belonged to the famous Victorian author Charles Dickens. It was one of hundreds of treasures that filled the small room. All around them, priceless artefacts and heirlooms hung from the walls and ceiling. More rested on warped shelves or sat, piled high, in the corners.

It had all been collected by the house's previous owner, the reclusive Professor Howe. After he had mysteriously vanished the previous year, the house and all of its contents had been bought by Tilda's parents. Most of the professor's belongings had been worthless – 'little more than junk', their father had said. That was because he had had no idea that the professor's wealth had all been stored in a hidden room behind the attic wall.

Tilda and Charlie had found the room by chance several months earlier, and now used it as a place to escape to whenever they were bored.

"I never said that I *was* the boss of you," Tilda replied gently, "but you know what'll happen if Dad discovers this room – and how much trouble we'll be in for not telling him!"

"We'll have to tell him, one day," Charlie said. "Imagine how rich he'll be if he sells all of this stuff."

He peered down at the book. "I bet even this bloke" – he paused, and checked the book's cover – "*Dickens'* scribbles are worth a few hundred quid." Carelessly, Charlie tossed the book towards his sister.

The fragile pages flapped like a bird's wings before Tilda caressed the book out of mid-air, anxiously cradling it to her chest. "Do you know who Charles Dickens is?"

"Did he play for Nottingham?"

"No, he did not!" Tilda snapped. "Charles Dickens is the greatest writer that Great Britain has ever produced."

Charlie scratched his head. "I thought that it was meant to be Shakespeare?"

Tilda answered, "Charles Dickens was a genius. He wrote some of the most enduring stories ever published."

"Like 'The Three Little Pigs'?"

"No, like 'Great Expectations', 'Hard Times' and..."

She glanced down at the book in her hands.

"...and 'A Christmas Carol'."

Charlie suddenly sounded interested. "I really wish it was Christmas. I want that mountain bike I was telling you about, and a games console..."

"Sometimes, I really cannot believe you, Charlie Hacker," Tilda snarled. "You're surrounded by some of history's greatest treasures and all you can think about is Christmas presents."

Gesturing at the portraits and ornate shields hanging from the walls, Charlie said, "But I can't actually *do* anything with these things. You won't even read that stupid book, Tils, 'cause you're scared of damaging it."

Tilda found herself almost breathless with frustration. She jabbed the copy of 'A Christmas Carol' towards Charlie like a weapon. "Things like this book give us an insight into what life used to be like. This is real history."

Tilda's brother dismissed her comments with a wave. "I already know what life was like in Victorian times – we studied it last term."

"Oh, really?" Tilda fixed her brother with a challenging stare. "Tell me what it was like, then."

After shrugging his slim shoulders and casually twitching both eyebrows, Charlie said, "Everyone was poor! They wore rags for clothes, most had no shoes and they lived in slums piled with stinking sewage."

Tilda couldn't prevent a burst of laughter from exploding from her mouth. "Are you sure that you paid attention in class?"

"It's true!" Charlie insisted. "Factories belched smoke everywhere. Poor children had to go to work when they were ten and, if you didn't have a job, they threw you into a workhouse that was worse than prison."

"Nonsense," Tilda shook her head so hard that both of her sandy-coloured pigtails danced like angry snakes. "It was the end of the industrial revolution and for the first time, almost everyone had a job. People flocked to cities to work and improve their lives. York had a huge carriage-building industry."



She rapped the Charles Dickens manuscript against her knuckles. "I'd love to live or work in a Victorian family home. It certainly sounded far more pleasant and civilised than life today."

"You've been watching those historical dramas with Mum, again."

"Actually, those programmes are very educa-"

"Whatever," Charlie smirked. "My teacher said that life was harsh for ordinary people back in Victorian times. You're living in a fantasy world if you think that it was nice."

"Rubbish!" Tilda could feel anger heating her cheeks. "If we go online, we can –"

"We don't need the Internet," Charlie hissed. He shuffled across the room until he was standing beside a cork board filled with pins. "We can go back and see for ourselves – if you dare!"

The tatty cork board hanging above a seventeenth-century writing desk looked little more than a useful storage area. A collection of small, fabric bags hung from individual pins, each labelled with a period from

history. These stretched from Ancient Britain to the more recent Second World War.

Charlie was wearing the grin of a mischievous toddler as he reached out and plucked a bag from the pin labelled 'Victorians'. The room filled with the clink of coins as he bounced it gently against his palm.

"All we have to do is find the doorway," Charlie reminded his sister.

Tilda felt her stomach churn with nerves and excitement. It was a feeling that she wrestled with each time Charlie reached for one of the small bags. She sometimes wondered if she would ever get used to the adrenaline rush of time travel. Before letting the excitement reach her face and become a grin, Tilda allowed her older-sister caution to take over momentarily.

"Haven't you learned anything?" Tilda wagged a finger at her younger brother. "Every time we travel back in time, we find ourselves in trouble. Think about what happened when we went back to Roman times – I was almost sold as a slave!"

"Yeah," Charlie laughed, "to me! Maybe you need to do everything I say."

Tilda snorted. "I'm serious. We need to think this through."

Charlie pocketed the small bag and quickly began to rummage through the stacks of paper and scrolls that littered the desk. Eventually, he pulled out a piece of thickly folded paper which he opened out across the worktop.

"All we have to do is find the doorway," he explained, searching the sketched streets of York, which stretched across the map like arteries and veins. "The Victorians were much more civilised than the Romans. What's the worst that could happen?"

According to Professor Howe's journal, this map plotted the location of a number of time doors – the Professor called them 'gates' – leading back to different periods in the city's history. The small bags that hung from each pin contained coins and trinkets from those periods and it was these items which could enable the holder to pass through the gate.

The two children had been sceptical at first, neither quite prepared to believe that time travel was possible. Yet, when they had finally dared to put the professor's theories to the test, the results had been astonishing.

"We'd never find the right clothes," Tilda said from her position peering over Charlie's shoulder. "We'd stand out like sore thumbs and that would attract trouble."

"We can go to the fancy dress shop," Charlie said. "They've always got Oliver Twist costumes in stock – is that a Dickens one?"

As exciting possibilities began to bubble in Tilda's mind, her eyes skirted the map's inked streets and roads until she found one marked 'Shambles'. Perhaps York's most historic and famous street, the Shambles was still filled with timber-framed buildings which hung over the ancient cobbles like the hoods of watchful spectres.

Tilda's gaze settled upon the sketch of a key sitting a few backstreets away. A single word, so carefully written beneath the key, grabbed her attention: 'Victorians'.

Perhaps sensing his big sister's brewing enthusiasm, Charlie dragged the little fabric pouch out of his pocket and dropped it onto the map.

"We can both be in Victorian York by tomorrow lunchtime. We'd see for ourselves what life was really like and remember, Tils, time stands still here while we're away, so we've nothing to lose. It'll be a laugh!"



## Chapter Two

### The Oldest Door

Although Tilda had lived in York her entire life, she had never got used to the enchantment and significance that seemed to breathe from every brick and cobble on the Shambles.

The street itself wasn't very long and was much too tight to squeeze in even one of the many coaches that ferried almost seven million visitors to York every year. Yet none of that deterred any of those visitors from making a pilgrimage down York's medieval street.

Beside Charlie and Tilda, a throng of Spanish tourists milled around the gabled window of a fudge and toffee shop in the early morning sunshine. Busy trays of goodies drew hungry gasps as the group jostled to press their faces against tiny panes of glass.

“How are we supposed to disappear through a time gate with all of these people around?” Charlie grumbled. “Especially dressed like this – they’re all staring at us.”

Tilda stared at her reflection in the fudge shop window. She actually loved her costume. The shapeless brown dress, which fell to her ankles, was surprisingly comfortable.

Charlie’s costume was every bit as authentic, although his shorts and grey shirt were clearly a size or two too big for him. The shorts themselves reached halfway down his shins, where they would have flapped like sagging flags, had Charlie not also been given a pair of long, white, knee-length socks to tuck them into. He’d also paid extra for a pair of scruffy braces to stop his shorts from falling down. The shop owner had sniggered as he’d told Charlie, “See! That’s exactly how a smart Victorian lad would look!”

The shoes that they both wore had been ‘borrowed’ from a shelf in their father’s antique shop. The soles rattled against the cobbles like firecrackers and Tilda imagined that walking on stilts would be easier.

“Don’t worry, the gate isn’t on the Shambles,” Tilda pointed to one of the street’s decorated shop fronts. “There’s a little alleyway next to that tea room. We can slip through unnoticed and follow it to a backstreet. That’s where the gate is.”

“OK,” Charlie nodded. “Let’s be quick – I know how animals must feel in a zoo now!”

After slipping into the alley, Tilda led them through various left and right turns until they stepped out onto a scruffy backstreet. She guided Charlie to a narrow, wooden door; what looked like centuries-old paint peeled from the cracked wood, and the brass handle had been worn smooth by hundreds of hands.

“Look how small it is.” Charlie drew a line in the air from the tip of his chin to the top of the door. “Are you sure this is the right spot?”

Although she hadn’t brought the professor’s map with her, Tilda was certain that they were in the right place.

“It’s got to be the oldest door on the street. But if you didn’t know it was here, you’d easily miss it.”

Overpowered by curiosity, Tilda crouched until her eyes were level with the keyhole. When she pressed her eye against the tiny gap, she was surprised to see that the door led not into a room, but a narrow passageway between neighbouring buildings.

“It’s a snicket,” she told Charlie. “There’s no house on the other side.”

“What, so it just leads out onto another street?” Charlie asked. “Where do you think it’ll take us?”

“Dunno,” Tilda shrugged, giddy with excitement, “but there’s one way to find out.”

Her feet tapped out a nervous beat on the uneven cobbles. Unlike York’s tourist areas, this street had received very little attention over the years. In fact, Tilda wondered if its neglected surface had changed very much at all in the last century.

“Did you remember the key?” she asked.

When Charlie dropped a tiny coin onto Tilda’s outstretched palm, a thumb-smoothed image of Queen Victoria stared up at her. Professor Howe had explained in his journal that without the right key, the time-travelling gates were nothing more than ordinary doors and walls. To pass from one period of time to another, the traveller had to possess an item originally made in the period that they wanted to visit. The professor had spent years collecting interesting trinkets and coins from each period. The coins that Tilda and Charlie now held would unlock the Victorian doorway.

When Charlie glanced up at his sister, Tilda could see that an appetite for adventure glistened from his eyes like candle flames.

“Do you want to try the door first?” he asked.

Tilda was wearing the impish grin of a seasoned mischief-maker as she shook her head.

“Nope!” Giggling, Tilda thrust her hands against Charlie’s chest to send her brother tumbling backwards through the solid wooden door. Tilda then closed her fingers around her coin, stooped instinctively and followed Charlie into Victorian York.



## Chapter Three

### Blaggers, Toffs and Overgrown Bantlings

Although Tilda and Charlie always found that going back in time was a thrill, the time-travelling process itself was uneventful. It was instantly obvious that they had left the twenty-first century behind, not because of the strange people or the cacophony of unfamiliar sounds that filled the narrow street in front of them. It was the gut-churning stench of human waste that was a dead giveaway.

Reeling as if she had just been slapped, Tilda clamped both hands across her mouth and nose. Beside her,

Charlie's gurgling throat told her that he was fighting the urge to be sick.

"That smell is awful," he eventually spluttered. "Where's it coming from?"

"Maybe that has something to do with it." Tilda pointed towards a slow-moving trickle of brown sludge which was creeping down the middle of the cobbled road. She didn't have to try too hard to work out what it might be.

Still holding his nose, Charlie reminded her, "We should have known, Tils. It was only the rich who could afford their own toilets back in Victorian times – and this certainly isn't a place where rich people live."

Shock stretched Tilda's eyes wide as she surveyed the busy street. Their trip through time had exchanged the neglected back alley for the filth and squalor of a nineteenth-century slum.

Above their heads, a weak, brown smog coated the otherwise blue morning sky like a threadbare shawl. Beyond the bowing roofs of the rickety houses, Tilda could see tall, thin, red-brick chimneys, each belching fumes and soot from the noisy factories

beneath. The same dirt and grime seemed to cover every surface – windows were unwashed, smeared by countless handprints, and an unhealthy crust sat beneath their feet. Dirtiest of all, though, were the people themselves.

“Don’t these people ever wash?” Tilda gasped as she watched a gang of younger children race past, playing a chasing game. Their dark clothing was dirty and unkempt. The boys’ trousers looked either too short, as if they had been outgrown, or several sizes too big. Although some of the dresses worn by the girls might once have been pretty, many sported tears and rips that were past the point of repair.

Elsewhere, small groups of young mothers huddled together outside open doorways, chatting as snotty-nosed toddlers played close by. Other women sat alone on their doorsteps, quietly darning holes in gloves that looked too clean and new to be their own.

“This is awful,” Tilda murmured. “How can people live like this?”

“I told you that it would be nothing like those TV shows that you’ve been watching,” Charlie said. “My teacher told me that life was hard for most people...”

His voice trailed off into stunned silence as his gaze lingered on the group of young children. “Where are their *shoes*?”

Pity knocked the breath out of Tilda as she realised that every child was barefooted. The skin on their unwashed feet was the same filthy brown colour as the cobbles. Most wore a collection of cuts and grazes in the same way that Tilda usually wore her socks.

“I don’t want to see any more of this.” Tilda pulled her stare away from the children. “I think we should go back.”

“No way!” Charlie snapped. “There’s so much more to see. Look!”

He pointed across the street to where a sullen woman stood beside her front door. She seemed oblivious to all the noise and bustle around her as she strained to turn the large metal handle of a rather strange contraption. The handle seemed to drive two wooden rollers stacked one on top of the other. It was only when Tilda saw the woman feed a damp shirt between them that she realised that there was a tiny gap. As the rollers gobbled up the shirt, excess water dripped into a trough beneath.

Charlie seemed quite excited. “I saw one of those on a school trip to an industrial museum. It’s think it’s called a tangle... no, no, wait... a mangle!”

“What is she doing?”

“Drying clothes,” Charlie added. “Look, the two rollers squeeze out the water. A guide at the museum said that if a woman’s husband died, well-wishers sometimes clubbed together to buy her a mangle.”

Tilda shook her head. “How can a mangle help if someone dies?”

“The other women probably bring her their clothes to dry. See?” Charlie pointed to a pile of damp clothing stacked on a stool beside the mangle. “The dead man’s wife can still earn a living. It certainly beats having to go into one of those wretched workhouses.”

“You two lost?” an unfriendly voice suddenly asked.

Still bewildered by all that she had seen, Tilda turned absent-mindedly to find herself face to face with a gaunt, middle-aged woman. Greasy, brown hair was pulled tight across her head and two blue eyes blazed with as much hostility as her voice.

Before Tilda could respond, the woman grabbed a handful of her dress and dragged it towards her nose.

“It smells like this comes from the queen’s wardrobe itself,” she hissed.

Tilda considered this for a moment. “Queen Victoria? The old woman who always wore black?”

“Yeah, but she’s not old now,” Charlie reminded her. Enthusiasm raised his voice. “She was eighty-one when she died, but that wasn’t until nineteen-oh-one. We learnt all about her in school, too. Did you know that she was only eighteen when she became queen but was the longest-reigning queen until –”

“Longest-reigning?” the woman scoffed. “Vicky’s only been on the throne a dozen years.”

“A dozen?” Charlie coughed.

“Crowned in thirty-seven,” the woman said. “Now’s forty-nine. Even I can work out those numbers. What do two overgrown bantlings know about the queen, anyway?”



“Mind your own business,” Tilda snapped, trying to pull her dress away from the pauper.

“She’s not even called Victoria.” Charlie couldn’t help himself. “Her first name’s Alexandrina, *and* she’s only five feet tall.”

The woman scowled. “Ugh, I knew you were toffs.”

“You think we’re toffs?” laughed Charlie.

“Those hands of yours haven’t seen a day’s work in their life,” the woman snorted, “and your clothes look too clean!” When the woman leaned closer, Tilda had to fight the urge to lean away from a sour smell. “Come to see how the other half live, have you?”

“Get your hands off my sister,” Charlie barked as he tugged Tilda away. “Don’t blame us for being smart enough to know where to steal new clothes from.”

“Steal?” asked Tilda. “But we –”

“Play along,” Charlie whispered from the corner of his mouth.

“On the blag, are you?” Doubt seemed to have replaced the woman’s eyes with narrow slits. “Most blaggers sell what they snatch. I could help you find a good home for those shoes – we could live like lords for a month on what we’d make.”

“Get your own!” Charlie growled, leaping aside as the woman made a lunge towards his feet.

When the woman made a second dive towards Tilda’s ankles, Charlie spun them both away. They quickly retreated along the cobbled street, only pausing when Charlie dragged Tilda into the shadows of a narrow alley.

Tilda gasped to regain her breath. “Why did you tell that woman that we were thieves?”

“So that she didn’t think that we were rich,” Charlie explained. “My teacher told us that Victorian slums were dangerous places for anyone with money – it’s better to make her think that we’re just like her.”

“So why did she call you a ‘blagger’?”

“Blaggers, vamps, gonophs – it’s what they called thieves. For lots of poor Victorians, stealing was the only way to survive.”

Tilda looked down at her Victorian costume. The cheap material was itchy and a seam of shoddy stitching was already fraying. “I can’t believe that poor woman thought that my dress was nice.”

“Our clean clothes make us stand out. I should have realised.”

Tilda glanced back down at her dress, casually flicking flecks of dirt from the fabric. “Well, there’s not a lot that we can do about that. These are all that we’ve got.”

“Not true, sis,” Charlie said, rubbing his flat palms against the grimy walls of the alley.

With both hands covered in dripping brown slime, he grinned up at his older sister, then promptly wiped both hands across her lovely, clean front.

“Hey!” Tilda yelped, fighting to bat her brother’s hands away. “Argh, that’s awful. Stop it!”

“We’ve got to blend in, Tils!” Charlie collected more grime from the walls, this time spreading it across his own clothes. “If we’re as dirty as everyone else, nobody will look at us twice.”

“You’d better clean these costumes when we get home,” Tilda insisted. “I’m going to need a week’s supply of lemon zest bath salts to wash this filth off my skin.”



## Chapter Four

### Filthy Lurkers

Charlie had been right. With fresh filth on their clothes, they now blended in with every other person they passed on the street.

Despite this, Tilda still felt uncomfortable. “These people all look so... hungry.”

“It’s the *slums*, Tils,” said Charlie. “This is where the poorest families live.”

“But Professor Howe’s journal said that the gate would bring us to the eighteen-forties,” Tilda recalled. “This

is when the industrial revolution had taken place and people had more jobs and wealth. Why are these people living this way?”

“Well, the good times clearly haven’t reached these folk yet,” Charlie observed as they sidestepped the street’s open sewer.

Tilda nodded sadly as she watched a group of tattily dressed women gather around a huge tap in the middle of the street.

She pulled Charlie’s elbow until he stood still. “Look!”

The women each took turns to pump water into buckets. It looked like hard work and the women were red-faced with effort long before their buckets were full.

“No running water in their homes,” Charlie said. “I guess that’s why they’re so dirty. It would take hours to fill a bath like that.”

They walked for several minutes before the crowded slums gave way to slightly nicer streets. The houses seemed a little bigger, there was less grime on the cobbles and the people were at least wearing shoes.

Tilda dared to take a gulp of air. “It doesn’t smell quite as bad.”

“I guess this is where the artisans live,” Charlie said.

“Arty-who?”

“*Artisans*. We read about them in school,” Charlie explained. “I think that these houses belong to the men who work in the factories – you know, those who know how to work the machines.”

“Stop that!” gasped Tilda as Charlie stooped to peer through a window. “It’s rude.”

Undeterred, Charlie pressed his face to the glass and beckoned his sister to join him. “See... there’s a Bible on that table. No televisions to keep them amused in the evenings, I suppose. Imagine that!”

Submitting to her own curiosity, Tilda squeezed in next to her brother. She was shocked to see how sparsely furnished and uninviting the tiny room seemed. In a corner, she spotted what might have been toys. They were little more than crudely carved wooden animals – she could see something the same shape as a dog or a horse. Next to those was a collection of wooden pegs

decorated with small pieces of cloth. Waves of sadness washed over her as she realised that these were some little girl’s dollies.

The walls themselves were undecorated and bare, save for a couple of precariously hung shelves holding a few pots and tins. Tilda’s gaze bounced around the room before finally settling onto a large iron pot strung above the room’s small grated fire. “Is that where they cook?”

“I guess so. Life here is almost as tough as in the slums,” Charlie reminded her. “The houses are tiny, no one has a bedroom to themselves... and there’s no loo, either.”

“What?!”

“If they’re lucky, there might be some in the alley outside,” Charlie told her. “But lots of families share them. And there’s no flush – just a bucket with ash to hide the smell.”

Tilda decided not to ask what Victorians used for toilet paper. “Perhaps that explains the smelly trickle in the slums,” she said quietly. This glimpse into a real-life Victorian home was far more fascinating and informative than any school museum trip.

The two time-travellers were so engrossed that neither heard the growing clomp of heavy footsteps until it was too late. Cruel fingers clamped down onto the shoulders of both siblings as a cruel voice bellowed, "What have we got here? A couple of filthy lurkers?"

"Burglars, eh?" a second voice suggested, as both children were hauled away from the window. "Looking for easy pickings or a leftover meal, perhaps?"

Tilda found herself staring up into the stern face of a very large man. A dark uniform was wrapped around broad shoulders, sporting a stitched badge on the collar. A tall top hat stretched the man's imposing height to almost seven feet tall.

Fixing her with a stern glare, the enormous man held Tilda against the wall of the house with one huge hand. Beside her, a much smaller man had wrestled Charlie into a similar position.

"What's your name?" The second man spat his question as if each word grazed his tongue.

"Gerroff me!" Charlie fought to pry the man's fingers from his shoulder. "We haven't done anything wrong."

"D'you hear that, Constable?" sneered the little man. "They haven't done anything wrong!"

"We'll be the judge of that, lad," boomed the man whom Charlie now recognised as a police constable. "Now, tell Mr Green your name."

"Hacker," Charlie reluctantly whispered. "Charlie Hacker."

The constable pinned Charlie to the wall with the point of his knee while the man known as Mr Green pulled a leather ledger from beneath his jacket and began to scan its pages. He shook his head and glanced back towards the policeman. "There's no one of that name paying rent to me in York."

Charlie thought fast. "That's because we don't pay rent," he stammered.

The constable glared at them both through suspicious eyes. "Did you hear that, Mr Green? These two don't pay any rent."

"They sound as bad as Mrs Baxter. She owes me seven pounds in back rent." Mr Green snapped his ledger shut. "I know all of the property owners in York and there's none by the name of Hacker."

Squirming against the policeman's grip, Charlie fired a question at the smaller man. "How can you know *everyone*?"

"Watch your tongue," the constable warned, digging his knee in further so that Charlie winced. "Mr Green is an important landlord in this town. He knows who owns property and who doesn't. That's his business – now, what's yours?"

"We... uh... well," Charlie stuttered.

"We're just visiting," Tilda said. "We're only here for a few days."

Rocking back on his heels, the constable howled with sarcastic laughter. "Visiting? Looking like that?"

His laughter stopped as he took hold of each child by the ear and pulled them in close. His voice become dangerously quiet. "I reckon you're just a couple of beggars – and we've got enough of those on the streets of York already."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tilda admitted, swallowing a whimper and desperately

trying to control the trembling in her voice, "but unless you can prove that we've done anything wrong, I think that you should let us go."

"You need to learn your place, young lady!" the burly constable growled as he freed the children's ears and pushed the pair towards the landlord. "Me and Mr Green here have scrounging tenants to evict and I'm thinking that you should accompany them to their next place of residence."

The smaller man offered a conspiratory nod and said, "Great thinking, Constable. The workhouse always has spare beds for the needy."

Tilda and Charlie watched the huge man open the door of the tiny house and take a determined step over the threshold.



## Chapter Five

### You Snooze, You Lose

Frozen to the spot, Tilda and Charlie listened carefully as the constable searched the tiny house. Fearful yelps told them that he had been successful. Heavy footsteps thundered down the staircase before the front door flew open and two figures were hurled out onto the street: a small girl and an even smaller boy.

“Found these two wretches hiding upstairs!” A satisfied smile sat across the constable’s lips like a fresh scar.

Mr Green’s brow furrowed as he scanned a page of his ledger. “Names?”

Two terrified faces peered up at the landlord; streaming tears painted tiny pathways down their dirty cheeks.

“Please don’t take us away, Sir,” sobbed the girl as she lay sprawled on the cobbles. Although she was much smaller than Tilda, her green eyes sparkled with an awareness that suggested that she was a similar age. “Our mother will be back soon. She’ll tell you –”

“Your mother is in the debtor’s prison,” barked the constable. “She owes three months’ rent.”

“She lost her job,” the girl cried. “When Father died and –”

“No rent, no house!” Mr Green snapped. “I have new tenants moving in tomorrow – good tenants who will pay their rent on time!”

The two children stared at each other as news of their mother’s plight began to sink in. Tilda couldn’t help wondering if a few minutes under a warm shower would turn their mousy hair into a nice shade of blonde. The only difference between them and her was a few good meals.

“But... but... where will we live?” asked the boy as his eyes filled with tears.

“All in good time,” smirked the landlord. “Now, tell me your names before I have the constable lock you up.”

The girl cradled her younger brother as she mumbled her answer. “Alice and Joseph Baxter.”

The landlord nodded once to the policeman, then stepped forward to lock the door of the little house. “I’ll have the woman’s possessions sold at auction – it might pay a day or two’s rent.”

“But that’s all we’ve got,” Alice Baxter sobbed weakly.

The policeman laughed. “Well, maybe your mother should have thought about that before she decided not to pay her rent. I’m sure you’ll have a lot of time to think about that, where you’re going.”

Tilda turned to Charlie, horror-struck. “They haven’t done anything wrong!” she whispered.

“As of now, you’re homeless,” Mr Green added, “and until your mother pays me in full, there’s nobody to

look after you. The governor has given you both a ticket to the workhouse.”

“How can she pay off her debt when you’ve thrown her in prison?!” Tilda blurted out, before she could stop herself. Her face flushed with anger.

“Mr Green does not have to explain himself to a *child!*” the constable bellowed. “These children are lucky that such a caring institution will take them – and so are you!”

“Lucky?” Charlie gasped. “Do you know how many people died in those workhouses?” He turned to Tilda, his wide eyes scouring the air in front of him for some kind of inspiration. They needed a plan, and fast.

As the constable pulled out his pocket book and began to scribble, an idea formed in Charlie’s mind.

“I’ll mark these two down as a couple of imbeciles or idiots – the workhouse might get a little more funding, that way,” the constable said.

There was a moment’s pause, and the final cog in Charlie’s mind clicked into place. “We’re not idiots,”



yelled the youngest Hacker, “and if anyone’s an imbecile around here, it’s you two!”

Terror threw a hand towards Tilda’s mouth. “Charlie, no!”

Tilda watched as Charlie began to back away from the two adults, crouching like an animal preparing to bolt. His eyes darted left and then right as he said slowly and clearly, “Back where we come from, it’s people like you who would go to prison.”

“Right, that’s it! I’ve had enough of you!” The constable reached for the heavy cosh hanging from his belt. “Children should be seen and not heard. Come here!”

Charlie easily ducked the policeman’s grasping fingers. “You’re too old and too slow. You couldn’t even catch a cold.”

Tilda knew that this wasn’t going to end well. With Charlie scuttling like a crab across the cobbles to avoid the constable’s increasingly desperate lunges, she cast a daring glance at Mr Green, who was watching on in horror. Heart pounding, she leaned as close as she dared to the two children and whispered, “Quickly, come with me.”

Alice and Joseph stared at the stranger’s outstretched hand with suspicion.

“Hurry, before they see us,” Tilda urged, beckoning them towards her. “It’s our only chance.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Alice nodded. A timid smile flirted across her lips as she scurried to her feet.

Joseph didn’t seem as eager. “I want Mama,” he whispered.

He was smaller than his sister, wearing clothes that hung from his thin frame like rags on a scarecrow.

“We’ll worry about that later,” Tilda promised him. “Let’s get away from these men first, eh?”

“Hey, where do you three think you’re going?” Mr Green’s shrill question startled the three would-be escapees. “You’re workhouse property now. Don’t you dare take another step.”

As Charlie danced rings around the constable, Tilda turned sharply away from the scene and urged the siblings to follow her. To her surprise, they went nowhere. Fear had rooted the two Baxter youngsters to

the spot, freezing them like hares caught in the glare of a poacher's lamp.

"Come on!" Tilda insisted, grabbing Alice's bony hand and tugging it desperately.

It was too late. Mr Green snatched Alice's other wrist and began to pull. The poor girl's limbs were soon stretched wide like a tug-of-war rope.

Behind them, Charlie's quickstep with the constable was nearing its end. The large man could no longer keep up with the youngest Hacker's pace and was struggling to catch his breath. Charlie left the policeman in his dust and headed straight for the landlord, who still had one hand around Alice's wrist and was reaching with his free hand towards the second Baxter sibling.

"You snooze, you lose!" Charlie sang, wrapping an arm around Joseph's waist and waltzing him away down a nearby alleyway. "Better luck next time, old man."

As the landlord cursed, torn between running to catch the boy and letting go of Alice, Tilda tugged on Alice's hand with all her strength. It was just enough to yank the girl free. "Hurry," she urged.

Both girls threw one final glance towards Charlie and Joseph before they also turned on their heels and ran, away from the landlord, in the opposite direction. They were just a footstep from escape when a pair of strong hands swooped towards them like the claws of a giant eagle.

"Not so fast, girls!" The triumphant constable grabbed each girl by the wrist. "We can't have those workhouse beds going to waste, can we?"



## Chapter Six

### Home, Sweet Home

The three-storey workhouse on York's Huntington Road loomed up from the ground like a giant demonic cliff face. Pokey windows gazed down onto the street below as if they were eyes searching for new victims. Above, noisy flocks of dark-feathered birds used the shallow slate roof as a take-off ramp, riding the air above the building with a freedom that its residents could only dream of. Made from thick strips of oak and fashioned together with iron struts and bolts, the heavy and unwelcoming door was clearly designed to prevent people from leaving.

"I've heard stories about this place," Alice whispered. "Whole families have gone in there and never been seen again."

"Maybe it's not as bad as you think," Tilda hoped. "I once read that people actually volunteered to go into the workhouses before they were abolished."

"Abolished?" Alice peered up at her new friend quizzically. "This building is brand new. How could it be abolished?"

Tilda pinched the skin on her own wrist, sharply reminding herself to watch what she said. Back at home, this building was now used as student accommodation. To Tilda, this was history; to people like Alice, it was life.

"Listen, I'm sure that your mum will find a way to sort out her debt and you'll be out of here in no time."

Alice chewed her bottom lip. "Mother has no money. My father died last year in an accident in the factory. She has *tried* to work since... she's a wonderful cook, you know... but she got ill and lost her job. They'll keep her locked up for months for the outstanding rent!"

Before Tilda could respond, what felt like a kick from a mule sent her stumbling towards the workhouse door.

“Welcome to your new home.” The constable leered at her. “I’m sure that Governor Watts will make sure that you have a *lovely* stay.”

Any hope of a reprieve disappeared at the loud *clank* of the door being unlocked. Hinges howled like a distressed banshee as the huge door swung open.

The constable grinned. “Home, sweet home,” he said.

\*

Elsewhere in York, Charlie was confronting an eye-watering smell. Pulling his shirt up to shield his nose, he turned his disbelieving eyes towards Joseph. “Tell me that’s not what I think it is!”

“It’s only night soil,” Joseph shrugged towards a mound of brown waste piled high in the corner of the courtyard. “Don’t worry, it gets cleared away every few days.”

After fleeing from the landlord’s greedy hands, they had darted into one of York’s many narrow alleyways.

Taking left and right turns at random, it wasn’t long before they were lost in the city’s labyrinth of slum rat runs.

Charlie was bent double, gasping for air. “Night soil? How does it get here?”

“Buckets, usually.” Joseph wiped the end of his runny nose on a sleeve, then ran tear-dampened fingers through his tousled hair.

“Surely there must be another way to get rid of it.”

“Not for the likes of us,” Joseph explained, looking at Charlie with confusion. “It’s only those posh folk in the big houses that have a proper petty.”

Charlie remembered reading that ‘petty’ was Victorian slang for ‘toilet’. He was trying to remember what else the Victorians called their toilets when Joseph suddenly folded his chin onto his chest and a silent sob shook his shoulders.

“What am I going to do without Mama? I’d have been better off in the workhouse with our Alice!”

"No!" Charlie shuffled awkwardly as he watched his new companion cry. "You don't want to go into the workhouse, Joseph. They're awful places." When Joseph didn't reply, Charlie asked, "How old are you?"

"Eight," sniffed Joseph.

Charlie was shocked; the boy looked several years younger.

"It was my birthday last week," Joseph continued. "Mama was going to get me some cinder toffee. What if I never see her again?" He began to wail, peering up at Charlie. "She'll be in there forever!"

"No, she won't! All she has to do is pay the rent."

"Oh, it's that easy, is it?" Joseph tried to wipe away his tears but more quickly replaced them. "She's got nobody to help her. Papa died last year at the factory and –"

"Your dad died?"

Joseph answered with a slow nod. "He got hurt by one of the machines. It was an accident. They happen all the time in the factories, Mama says. I miss him."

Charlie tried hard not to imagine what life might be like without his own dad. Victorian life seemed tough enough for poor families, but losing a father would make things extremely difficult, maybe even impossible.

Joseph seemed to sense Charlie's pity. "Mama looks after us. She's a great cook and makes the best spotted dick and custard. Until a few weeks ago, she had a job working in the kitchen for one of the councillors. Then, she got ill and couldn't work there anymore."

"Is that why she owed the rent?"

"I reckon so... but none of this would have happened if poor Papa hadn't died."

"Let's go to the factory, then," Charlie suggested.

Joseph looked confused. "What good will that do?"

"You're in this mess because of what happened at the factory," Charlie said. "It's *their* fault that your mum can't pay the rent. If we explain that to the owner, maybe he'll help."

“I’m not sure that it works that way,” Joseph replied. “Master Thompson told her that he was sorry when Papa died, but factories are dangerous places and –”

Charlie held up a hand. “Who’s Master Thompson?”

“He owns the factory,” Joseph told him. “Lots of people work for him.”

“Brilliant!” Charlie wrapped an arm around his new friend’s shoulders. “We’ll go and see him, then.”

Joseph squirmed away as if Charlie had a contagious disease. “An important man like Master Thompson will never see us. Nobody ever listens to poor folk from the slums, and especially not children.”

Undeterred, Charlie replied, “Well, maybe it’s about time that changed!”



## Chapter Seven

### Cockroaches on the Ceiling

“But I don’t need a bath, Matron Watts!” Tilda informed the stern-faced woman standing before her. “I had one last night.”

“Yes, and I’m Queen Vicky’s twin sister!”

Matron Watts sneered down at them through eyes as small and dark as currants. Arms so thin that they looked like they might snap at any moment were folded sharply across the woman’s chest. “Filthy paupers like you always need cleaning.”

She had already taken great delight in telling her latest arrivals that she was the workhouse governor's wife and therefore second in command. There seemed to be a lot of people in charge of lots of things in the workhouse. Tilda's head was spinning with all the titles and duties.

First, there was Master Watts, the governor. Apparently, he was in charge of everything, including the male paupers. Matron Watts, the governor's wife, claimed that she was in charge of the women and children. There was a nurse, too, although Tilda had yet to meet her.

Then, there was the porter and the schoolmistress. Matron Watts had explained that these were the people who supervised different areas of the workhouse, including the school rooms and the working rooms themselves.

Tilda had hoped that the matron might also explain how the workhouse functioned. From the outside, it had resembled a prison, with high walls and narrow, stern windows. Inside, it felt even larger and just as unfriendly. Long corridors stretched everywhere and Tilda had passed what looked like huge dormitories and exercise yards on her way to the matron's office.

It seemed like the men and women were kept apart. Even the boys and girls didn't seem to mix. Tilda wondered why.

It was clear that Matron Watts had no intention of explaining anything else. "From the look of all that muck and filth on your scabby dresses, you're probably riddled with ticks and lice. I'll have to burn those clothes, too. Now, hurry up and scrub your skin clean, before I call Mr Watts and tell him that you want extra work duties."

Tilda wondered if this was how criminals were treated. Since stepping through the door of the workhouse, the two girls had been shoved, marched, prodded and inspected. If that wasn't bad enough, they were now being ordered to rub their skins raw in a cold bath.

Minutes later, they were handed a matching set of uniforms. Little more than shapeless cotton shifts, the plain white pinafores had clearly been used many times before – the collection of stains and badly darned tears told a lifetime of stories. When she reluctantly hauled the garment over her shoulders, the itchy material scratched her skin like straw. Tilda briefly wondered what she would tell the man in the costume shop about her brown dress if it were burned.

“You’ll do well to keep those clothes clean,” the woman told them. “You’ll be wearing them for a month.”

“There should be laws against this kind of treatment,” Tilda whispered to Alice. “I’ve seen animals treated better.”

“You’re lucky to be here!” the woman snapped. “Her Majesty’s inspectors have given us their full approval – this is one of Yorkshire’s finest institutions. If it wasn’t for places like ours, where do you think people with no homes or hope would go? We give people a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep in and three meals a day. All we ask in return is good behaviour and hard work. Now, once the nurse makes sure that you’re not riddled with disease, I’ll have Miss Crowle escort you to your dormitory.”

The door had barely clicked shut before it flew open and a young woman breezed into the room. A wide smile seemed to brighten the walls like sunshine and a neatly starched pinfold dress told Tilda that this woman was probably the nurse.

“Who’ve we got here then, my lovelies?”

As Tilda forced a smile, her companion took an obedient step forward.

“Alice Baxter.”

Tilda sighed as she moved to her new friend’s shoulder. “Tilda Hacker.”

“Good, good,” the nurse said as she began to open and close drawers and cupboard doors. “I’m Nurse Atkins, but when we’re alone, you can call me Helen. Ah, here it is.” She held out a small wooden instrument which reminded Tilda of a long, thin megaphone or a hollow rounders bat. It was only when the nurse pressed one end of the instrument to Alice’s chest and the other end to her own ear that Tilda realised that this was an early stethoscope.

“Now, there’s really no reason why your examinations should last long at all.” Tilda almost gasped when Nurse Atkins gave both girls an exaggerated wink. “But I’ll take my time and give you the lowdown on what to expect from this place. Forewarned is forearmed, as my old nanny used to say.” Another heartwarming smile helped to calm their anxieties.



As Nurse Atkins gave Alice a cursory examination that included counting her pulse, inspecting her ears and looking under her tongue, she explained how the workhouse was structured.

“Men and women are kept separately,” she told them. “Meeting up is definitely out of bounds.”

“Even if they’re married?” Tilda asked.

“*Especially* if they’re married – and mothers can only meet their children on Sundays, for an hour or two. Brothers and sisters are kept on different wings.”

Alice giggled as Nurse Atkins gently tapped her knee with a small metal hammer. “Wings?”

“Different parts of the building. Each wing has its own places to live and work, even eat and exercise.” The nurse began to count them off on her fingers. “There’s a wing for the men, one for the women, one for girls and another for boys. There’s a medical wing, for those who become ill” – she swapped hands when she had exhausted all of her fingers – “and there’s one for the lunatics and imbeciles.”

“The policeman mentioned those,” Tilda recalled. “What did he mean?”

The nurse gave Tilda a sad shrug. “They’re poor souls who don’t know what day it is, or even their own names. They’re kept together and they don’t have to work, though, so I suppose it’s a little easier for them.”

Tilda raised her eyebrows. “*Easier?*”

“A lot of people in here would die if we weren’t here to help,” the nurse explained. “It’s why so many people want to come here.”

As the nurse reached to check Tilda’s pulse, the time traveller shook her head. “Wouldn’t it be better to help them pay their rents?”

The nurse chuckled. “What, and get nothing back in return? How would we ever sustain that? The workhouse needs to make money in order to feed, clothe and shelter these people. They work for us and with the money we make, we work for them, too.”

A sharp knock on the medical room door told them that they’d taken all of the time allowed. Tilda saw a veil of unhappiness sweep briefly across the young

nurse's face. She gently patted their shoulders while steering them towards the door, then pulled the girls close enough to make her whisper audible.

"Keep your wits about you around Agatha Crowle." The nurse's creased brow told Tilda that this was a warning that she should take seriously. "She's been here a long time and will do anything to curry favour with Governor Watts and earn more privileges. *Anything!*"

When the wooden door was pushed open, they were joined in the room by a tall girl wearing an identical uniform to the two new arrivals. Its owner scratched a nest of tightly curled auburn hair and twisted her thin lips into an impatient scowl.

"What's the delay? You know that the governor keeps a strict schedule."

"I have my own schedule to keep, Agatha Crowle." Nurse Atkins wagged a finger towards the girl as if it was the blade of a dagger. "You'll do well to remember that, too!"

Agatha clutched each new arrival by the wrist and tugged them into a cold corridor. The light dimmed as the medical room door slammed shut behind them.

"I don't care what that silly nurse told you," Agatha told them. "There's only one person you need listen to in this place" – she suddenly spun to face them, spewing foul breath from behind discoloured teeth – "and that's me!"

Tilda took a step back and coughed into her own hand. "That's odd, because I could have sworn that we met Governor Watts' wife a few moments ago. Surely, he's the one in charge around –"

"Governor Watts isn't interested in two scrawny street rats like you!" Agatha's cruel eyes flicked between Tilda and Alice. "He leaves the day-to-day running of things to trustworthy people like me. So as far as you two are concerned, I'm the boss."

Agatha's last word echoed off the damp corridor walls. Looking up, Tilda was horrified to see small, dark dots scurrying across the unpainted brickwork above their heads. She was even more horrified when she realised what they were: cockroaches!

As they continued to trail Agatha down the long corridor, Alice hooked an arm around Tilda's elbow and leaned in close. "I can't live here." Tilda could feel the poor girl shaking. "I need to get out so that I can

look after my Joseph. He might be eight but he's small for his age."

"Don't worry, Alice," Tilda assured her. "I have no intention of staying here a minute longer than I have to."

"What about your mother and father?" Alice whispered. "Won't they come looking for you?"

Tilda shook her head, suddenly realising how far from home she actually was. "Nope, they're... uh... we're here by ourselves."

"You're orphans?"

"Not exactly." Tilda was eager to change the subject. "But we don't need their help. My brother will find a way to get us out of here." She wondered, for a second, whom she was trying to convince.

Their tour guide led the girls deep into the bowels of the workhouse. They wound their way along several corridors, each as uninviting as the last, before a flight of bare stone steps carried them to a large, open-plan dormitory.

Dozens of spindly metal bed frames lined the walls. Each bed was topped by two or three scratchy grey blankets, and what passed for a pillow served to illustrate that comfort was an unnecessary luxury.

"This is where you'll sleep. That's your bed," Agatha sneered. "You're sharing."

Tilda's stomach rumbled as she took a short walk along the row of beds. "What time do we eat?"

Agatha's laughter chased them down the dormitory like the rattle of machine-gun fire. "You don't get food unless you've *earned* it – and you don't earn it unless you *work*. That's why they call this place a *workhouse*."



## Chapter Eight

### The Railway City

Charlie could hear sounds coming from the factory long before they reached its red-brick walls. The *thump* and *clank* of hammers striking metal rang like the beats of a tone-deaf percussionist. The belch of coal fumes and acrid steam had begun to itch Charlie's nostrils several streets earlier.

The boys peered around the final corner into the courtyard of the enormous factory building. Charlie's gaze soon landed on a small group of children younger than him, whose weary faces strained as

they pushed heavy carts and dragged sacks almost as big as themselves.

"What are those boys doing in there?" he asked.

Joseph shot him a puzzled stare. "Working, of course."

"Working? Aren't they too young?"

"Well, you only have to be ten to work in a factory," Joseph told him. "Papa always promised that he'd get me a job here when I was old enough. Six twelve-hour days earns you good money."

Charlie suddenly felt very lucky to have been born in the twenty-first century.

The factory's delivery yard was as a hive of activity, with men dragging heavy sacks and pallets from the backs of horse-drawn carts. Others used chains and a hoist to unload even heavier cargo.

"What do they do here?" he asked.

"They build railway carriages," Joseph explained as they passed a group of sweating workmen. Their faces glowed with fatigue beneath skin painted black by

a day's hard work. "There are lots of other factories around the city and they all build parts for the trains and carriages. York's a railway city."

Inside, they could see more men toiling away on workbenches or pulling the levers of hissing metal steam-presses which thumped iron sheets into shape. Other teams scurried around the carcasses of what looked like half-built carriages and wrestled with the ribs of metal and wooden framework. Charlie could see how dangerous the place was and how easily someone like Joseph's father could be hurt or killed.

"Isn't every city a railway city?" Charlie wondered, thinking of the busy railway stations in the centre of most large cities.

"Definitely not," Joseph insisted. "We've got about ten trains a day heading directly to London," he said proudly. "You know how Sheffield has its steelworks, Bradford has its cloth mills and Liverpool has its docks? Well, my dad always said that the carriages we build here are pulled all around the country." Joseph pointed out across the rooftops. "Mr Hudson convinced them to build a line here. He says the railway is going to change the world."

"Mr Hudson?" Charlie scratched his head. He remembered making a trip to York's famous railway museum and having great fun clambering aboard some of the trains, but he couldn't remember seeing anything mentioning a man called Hudson.

"Papa always said that George Hudson should be knighted," Joseph continued. "They call him 'The Railway King'. If he gets his way, trains will come here from all across the country. Papa reckoned that Mr Hudson could make York the biggest city in the north. They'll probably make a statue of him when he dies."

Charlie was amazed at his new friend's passion for railways. The youngster seemed genuinely proud of his city's industrial contributions, and even prouder that his father had played even a small part. Charlie felt a little sad that life had changed so much for most towns in the twenty-first century. Many of those unique industries that they'd been so proud of had almost completely disappeared, and there was definitely no statue of George Hudson that Charlie had ever seen. He was just beginning to wonder if Mr Hudson's reign as 'The Railway King' had ended badly when one of the sweating workmen stepped towards them.

“If you’re looking for charity, you’ll find none here!”

“We don’t want charity,” Charlie replied. “We want to see the owner.”

Cruel laughter exploded from the worker’s mouth. “What do a couple of scrawny paupers like you want with Master Thompson? The master has no time.” The man squeezed Charlie’s arm as if he were examining a joint of meat. “Not for the likes of you.”

Snatching his arm free, Charlie asked, “Isn’t that for him to decide?”

Joseph gasped and his hands flew to his mouth. The trepidation painted on his face told Charlie that children rarely spoke in this way to adults.

The workman stared at the hand that had gripped Charlie’s arm. His eyes were held wide with astonishment as he looked up at the two boys.

“Master Thompson. Please,” repeated Charlie.

The workman’s face contorted into a confused frown and he stared at Charlie as though he were a new species of animal. When Charlie stood his ground,

glaring back into the man’s face, the workman finally nodded towards the busy factory.

“Suit yourselves, but he rarely comes here these days. If it’s a job you’re looking for, you’re better heading to the master’s house. They’re always looking for new servants up there. I heard that they sacked the cook, yesterday.”

\*

The two boys rested their chins on the top of the chin-high stone walls and gazed up at a beautiful three-storey house. A shallow roof of dark slate sat like a cap atop broad walls made from blocks of Yorkshire stone. Sunlight reflected against the glass of large sash windows, each framed in painted white stone which matched the corners of the building.

The grounds themselves were just as impressive. A thick pathway of white gravel surrounded the house before giving way to a swathe of perfectly manicured lawns and flowerbeds. The owner was clearly a wealthy man.

“I think that the least Master Thompson can do is pay your mother’s debts,” Charlie told Joseph. “It’s his machines that killed your dad.”

“People die all the time,” Joseph told him. “Mama says that Papa knew the risks when he went to work there.”

“But that doesn’t make it right. The factory owners should look after the people who work for them.”

Joseph pulled his gaze from the master’s house and stared at his friend. “She says that they’re all too busy making money for things like that. Rich folk like Master Thompson don’t help the likes of us.”

“Perhaps he’ll help if we tell him what happened to your mum,” Charlie suggested. “We’ll need to get inside the house first and that’s not going to be easy.”

“There might be a way,” Joseph said, rubbing his narrow chin as he studied the large house and grounds. “That man at the factory said that there were loads of servants in the house.”

“Yeah, and they’re the ones who will stop us getting anywhere near the master.”

The smile that lit Joseph’s face told Charlie that his friend had a plan. “Not if we look like them, they won’t.”

When Joseph nodded towards a line of clothing that fluttered like bunting in the breeze, Charlie understood what he was thinking.

“Joseph Baxter...” he laughed as both boys began to clamber over the wall, “...you’re a genius!”



## Chapter Nine

### Gormless Sauceboxes

As Agatha led them from one end of the building to another, Tilda glanced through some of the narrow windows. They seemed to face other outbuildings which made up more ‘wings’ of the institution, and both new arrivals gazed in silence at the cobbled yards in between, which were filled with people.

“That’s where the the men exercise,” Agatha told them. “We’ve got our own yard to use, too.”

“How many yards and wards are there here?” Alice enquired.

“Lots.” Agatha threw her a weary glance, as if explaining this was too much trouble. “There’s one for the men and another for women. Boys and girls, too. Oh, and the unmarried lasses.”

Tilda was wondering if this was a blueprint for modern-day prisons when Agatha steered them into a large room. Lines of girls sat at tables and workbenches that stretched the length of the room. Oil lamps cast twitching shadows from iron mountings on the wall and fear seemed to hang like a constricting cloud in the gloom above their heads. Although the room was easily four times the size of her modern classroom and filled with ten times as many girls, Tilda was met by a wall of absolute silence.

Agatha marched them briskly across the length of the room. Tilda could feel at least fifty pairs of eyes following her as she walked.



“Here they are, Matron Watts. Bathed and ready to work,” Agatha announced.

As the matron’s eyes slowly surveyed the two new arrivals, a mumble of curiosity rolled across the room.

“Shut your gormless sauceboxes!” The room fell into shocked silence and the matron threw an arm towards the darkest corner of the room. “Sit them down over there, Crowle. I don’t want any problems, so make sure that they know the rules!”

“Mother would die if she knew that I was in here,” Alice whispered to Tilda as they took their seats. The girls next to them looked pale and thin. “She always said that Father worked hard to keep us out of places like this.”

“I’m sure that you won’t be in here for long,” Tilda assured her, before a deafening *bang* shook the table in front of her as Agatha Crowle slammed a hand down onto the wood.

“You’re here to work, not chatter,” she snapped, dropping a thick coil of rope onto the tabletop in front of Tilda. “This is how you earn your keep.” She pointed to the other girls, all busy at work. “We call this oakum. You untwist the old rope and pick out the

strands so the governor can sell it for caulking the joints of ships’ timbers. If you unpick enough strands, Matron *might* let you eat this evening.”

Wondering briefly how much truth there was in Agatha’s threat, Tilda prodded a knot of rope with her finger. It felt harder than wood. “Unpick it? How am I supposed to do that?”

Snorting unkindly, Agatha wiggled her fingers. “What do you think these are for? Now, make yourself busy, before I tell the matron that you’ve broken one of her rules.”

“I don’t even know the r—” Tilda argued, before a stern, wide-eyed stare from the matron at the front of the room forced her lips together.

\*

They worked without speaking. The thick knots of old rope were almost impossible to unpick; years of use had tightened them into solid blocks, so it wasn’t long before both girls’ fingertips were shredded and bloodied. Tilda had no way of knowing how long she was expected to work for, and the enforced silence of the room meant that she was too afraid to ask. She

didn't know what it was that kept every single girl in the room so quiet, but she knew that she didn't want to find out. As she looked to her left and right, she saw that most of the girls had managed to pull twice as many strands free of the rope as she had.

When Matron Watts finally rang a heavy bell to signal that the work was over, Tilda and Alice had hardly anything to show for their efforts. Agatha worked her way down the table, sweeping piles of unpicked rope into a basket. She stopped when she reached Alice and Tilda.

She glared down at a small pile containing little more than a dozen thin strands. "What is the governor supposed to do with that?"

Tilda held up sore fingers. "It's the best that I could do. Please, just look at what it's done to my hands!"

"Oh, what a pity," mocked Agatha. "The new girl has cut her little fingers." Her face hardened. "You're a disgrace!"

"Do we have a problem down there?" Clomping footsteps carried the matron's foreboding question towards them. "You know what I think about problems, Crowle."

Before the woman reached them, Agatha swept the pushed pile of strands towards Tilda. It now looked like Alice had done no work at all. Tilda opened her mouth to object, but it was too late.

Agatha pointed towards Alice. "Look, Matron! The young girl hasn't done a scratch of work all morning."

Matron Watts came to a standstill next to them. Her nostrils flared angrily. "Didn't you tell her the rules, Crowle? If they don't work, they don't eat!"

Alice's eyes widened in horror. "Wait... no... we..."

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK OUT OF TURN?!" shrieked the matron. Alice jumped in her seat and a heavy sob shook her as she clutched at Tilda's hand under the table, tears beginning to roll silently down her cheeks.

Tilda locked stares with Agatha as she squeezed Alice's hand, before standing up to face the furious woman. Her heart pounded in her chest and her fingers throbbed inside her clenched fists. "It's my fault. I stole Alice's rope to make it look like I'd done more work. It's me you should be punishing, not her."



## Chapter Ten

### Plum Duff and Old Prunes

Charlie had to breathe in before he could fasten up his waistcoat. It was at least a size too small and now squeezed him tighter than one of his Aunt Pippa's suffocating hugs. Beside him, Joseph was desperately trying to keep his trousers from falling down. Their owner was clearly much larger than Joseph and had longer legs, too.

The two boys were behind a small outhouse, a short distance from the mansion's kitchen. The smell of freshly baked pastry was sending Charlie's taste buds into overdrive. Charlie watched as two young servant girls began to pluck the dry clothes from the washing line. They were too busy giggling and gossiping to notice that any garments had gone missing.

"If we follow those girls into the house, we should be able to blend in with the rest of the staff," he told Joseph.

"What if someone asks us what we're doing?"

Thinking fast, Charlie snapped a handful of tulip stalks and thrust them into Joseph's hands. "We tell them that we're taking fresh flowers to the master's study. Now come on, we don't have all day."

With their arms stacked high with the freshly dried clothes, the two servant girls were the perfect shield for Charlie and Joseph as they sneaked through the back door. Charlie ran his hand across the heavy, wooden door, which looked like it might once have belonged in a castle. As his eyes lingered on the solid stone archway that framed the doorway, he tried to imagine the skill and effort that had gone into making it. The craftsmanship reminded him that buildings certainly weren't made to these standards back in the twenty-first century.

Joseph's wide eyes and gaping mouth told Charlie that his friend was just as amazed by the size and opulence of the house. As they covertly followed the two serving girls through a labyrinth of corridors, both boys gazed

at the polished wooden floors, beautifully carved furniture and enough framed portraits and painted landscapes to fill a gallery.

“This feels amazing,” Charlie pointed out, running his hand across the soft surface of detailed floral wallpaper.

Joseph seemed less impressed. “I prefer the plain walls that we have at home. This looks like someone’s trying to show off too much.”

When they arrived at the foot of the house’s sweeping, grand staircase, Joseph gasped. “Look out!” He instinctively tugged Charlie away from the snarling jaws of a bear.

Charlie chuckled as the two boys gazed up at the stuffed head of the once ferocious beast. It was mounted on a board and hung halfway up the staircase wall like a macabre trophy. The heads of foxes, boars and a red stag with huge antlers decorated the rest of the staircase.

The small boy clung to Charlie’s arm. “Are they dead?”

“Of course they’re dead,” Charlie laughed, hoping that his words would calm his friend’s trembles. “This is called taxidermy.”

“Taxi-what?”

“It’s an art form.” Charlie pointed up at the bear. “Look how they’ve made the heads so lifelike.”

Joseph shook his head. “Those poor animals!”

Charlie shrugged. “Well, it was very popular in Victorian times.”

When he saw his new friend’s eyes blink with confusion, he quickly corrected himself. “I mean, it *is* very popular. Especially in the houses of rich people, like this.”

“Well, I can’t believe how big this place is,” Joseph whispered. “Or how clean it is!”

“That’s what you get when you have servants,” Charlie pointed out. His gaze swept across the dark, wooden tables, sideboards and bureau, each housing the kind of valuables that his father would love to sell. He saw desk clocks decorated with polished marquetry, tall

vases and even a large glass display dome filled with shells and pebbles plucked from a distant beach.

“I wish Tilda could see this. She thinks that this is how everyone lives.”

As his thoughts drifted toward his older sister, a sense of urgency bubbled within Charlie. It was the same sensation that he felt every time he found himself separated from his sibling in an unfamiliar part of history. Even though the pair had saved themselves from worse scrapes than this in the past, Charlie couldn't silence the memories of his history lessons that were ringing in his ears.

*'People feared the workhouse, and would do anything to avoid being sent there.'*

He shook the thought from his mind and concentrated on his plan. If all went well, both Tilda and Alice would be home in no time.

\*

“You'll get no supper,” Alice reminded Tilda as they followed the rest of the workhouse girls along another long, cold corridor. “You must stop speaking to people

like you do, Tilda. People in charge don't like being told that they're wrong, especially by children, and remember what that nice nurse told us – we shouldn't cross Agatha.”

“Quiet, back there!” shouted a shrill voice from the front of the group. The workhouse schoolmistress had collected the large group of girls from the workroom (where she had been warned about Tilda's 'undesirable attitude') and was now leading them through the building in total silence. It was unnerving: the Victorians seemed to value children so little. Tilda was used to having a voice and being listened to. Life was definitely different in the twenty-first century.

The girls marched solemnly until they eventually reached a large room that looked almost identical to the last. Tilda and Alice took their seats on a large workbench and stared down at what appeared to be a pile of rags.

“I thought that this was the education room,” Tilda picked up a small square of white linen. “But this doesn't feel like a school – what lesson is this?”

“I heard one of the other girls say that they did some reading after prayers this morning,” Alice whispered

as one of the other girls handed her a small box containing needles and cotton bobbins. “Now, it must be needlework. Don’t worry, I’m sure that we’ll do knitting, too.”

“Pay attention, everyone,” the schoolmistress barked from the front of the room.

Schoolmistress Wales was a thickset woman who probably looked a lot older than she was. Steel-grey hair was twisted into a large bun perched on the top of her head. She sat herself behind a large desk, on a chair that seemed to struggle to hold her weight. A huge, brown dress seemed to be straining to keep her bulk enclosed.

Her eyes scanned the girls as if looking for victims. “Yesterday’s needlework was appalling. I’ve never seen such clumsy work. You should be ashamed.”

A mutter of nervous discontent washed across the workbenches.

“What self-respecting family would employ you if you can’t even darn your master’s sock or sew on his buttons?” the woman scoffed. “Needlework is a basic

skill for a modern girl. The sooner you learn this, the quicker we can move on to teaching you about other domestic duties.”

Tilda suddenly felt quite sad that Victorian girls appeared to have such limited opportunities. In the twenty-first century, clever girls like Alice could have any job they wanted. Looking around at the other girls, with their eyes fixed on their desks and their hands on their laps, Tilda tossed her linen square aside.

“Domestic duties? Is she serious?”

“Shhhhhh!” Alice begged. But it was already too late.

A few seats down, Agatha leapt to her feet and jabbed a skinny finger towards Tilda. “Mistress! The new girl is being disorderly again.”

“Disorderly?” Tilda hissed. “Do you mean pointing out that girls are capable of doing far more than needlework and dusting?”

Alice grabbed Tilda’s wrist and squeezed. Her face was filled with fear and her eyes pleaded with her new friend as she whispered, “Tilda, what are you doing? You can’t speak like that!”

“SILENCE!” the schoolmistress thundered as she strode towards Tilda. “I’ll have none of your insolence. You should know your place!”

“Know my place?” Tilda brushed Alice’s hand away as she leapt to her feet, pushing more scraps of linen onto the floor. “How can you teach these poor girls that the only thing they’re good enough for is sewing and cleaning, when the most powerful person in the country is a woman?”

Alice buried her face behind both hands as the large woman’s reddened cheeks shook with fury. Tilda turned to the girls seated at the workbenches, some of whom were staring wide-eyed at her, but many of whom were focusing intently on their sewing so as not to be caught up in the inevitable punishments. “Women can do more than sew!” she announced. More girls started to lift their heads away from their needlework. “There’ll be a woman prime minister, one day...”

Tilda turned back to the schoolmistress, fuelled by the fear and confusion that she saw in the eyes of every girl in the room.

“...but not until we get rid of wrinkled old prunes like you!”

\*

As Charlie and Joseph ventured deeper into the huge house, the delicious smell of freshly baked food wafted through the corridors, sending a rumble of appreciation through Charlie’s stomach.

“Mmmm, what is that yummy smell?”

Joseph drew a loud and lingering sniff through his nostrils. “Plum duff, I reckon.”

“Plum what?”

“It’s a steamed pudding,” Joseph rubbed his belly. “Mama says that rich folk eat it all the time. She used to make it before she became ill. I wonder what else they’re cooking.”

The two boys followed the mouthwatering smells until they arrived at a large kitchen, alive with noise and heat. A large woman wearing a flour-smearred apron was elbow-deep in a huge porcelain sink, scrubbing pots and pans clean. As she dried her hands and began to chop vegetables, she spotted Charlie and Joseph lurking in the doorway and her face lit up with relief.

“You’re here. Hurry, hurry! We’ve been waiting for you two.”

“What? No!” Charlie gasped. “We’re not... erm... we...”

“Quickly! You’re not here for beer and skittles.” She waddled towards them before grabbing each by the elbow. “The footman has been promising me some help since the master’s wife dismissed my cook. I was expecting a lassie but you two will have to do.”

She spun two mixing bowls across the worn, wooden surface and thrust a couple of spoons into their hands.

“Tarts!”

“I beg your pardon?” Charlie spluttered.

“Strawberry tarts!” The woman jabbed a plump finger towards a packed larder. “You’ll find everything you need on those shelves. Two dozen should do nicely.”

As both boys watched the large woman waddle away to deal with a soup pan which was boiling over, Joseph whispered, “I’ve helped Mama cook tarts once at home. I think I can remember her recipe.”

A smile stretched across Charlie’s mouth as the boys began to plunder the larder for ingredients. Charlie did a double take as he realised that he recognised several brands.

“Look! They use the same custard powder and mustard that we have at home.”

Joseph gawped at him. “You have mustard in your house?!”

“Uh...” Charlie began, before a loud *thwack* from the kitchen worker’s rolling pin made both boys jump.

“You two! Less talking, more baking!”





## Chapter Eleven

### Parlour Tricks and Gigglemugs

“Did you really call my schoolmistress an old prune?”

Tilda honestly thought that she saw the flicker of an amused smile skip across the lips of Governor Watts as he gazed at her from across his large walnut desk. Thick fingers kneaded his strong chin, and his large blue eyes had a warmth that seemed to belong in a place less hostile than a workhouse.

Beside him, the schoolmistress clenched her jaw tight. “It was a *wrinkled* old prune, actually.”

Alice’s warning was still ringing in Tilda’s ears as she failed to catch the snort that escaped from her left nostril.

“This is a very serious matter,” the governor warned. “This is a workhouse, Miss Hacker, and you’re nothing but a child. A girl, too! You’ll do well to remember that girls your age should only speak when they are spoken to. You should also think yourself lucky to be here.”

“This girl should be kept with the imbeciles!” barked the schoolmistress.

The governor leaned back in his creaking, leather chair. A long, heavy sigh suggested that this was his least favourite part of his job. “I could have you whipped for this kind of behaviour, or sent to the refractory cell for a period of solitary confinement...”

“A month, at the very least!” Schoolmistress Wales insisted.

The governor’s eyes never wavered from their contact with Tilda’s. “However, I am prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt, on this occasion. You are new to this workhouse and perhaps are not fully aware of our rules.”

“Governor, I must –” started the schoolmistress.

“You seem like an intelligent girl, Miss Hacker. But you must learn to recognise your place.”

Tilda wanted to stand her corner, but sensed that this was not the moment to argue. Instead, she waited with bated breath to find out what her punishment would be, trying to ignore her niggling memory of what Charlie had said about people dying in workhouses. The governor’s nod seemed to acknowledge her reluctant obedience. “You will go without food until supper tomorrow. For the next two weeks, you will have no cheese or meat.”

Beside Tilda, the schoolmistress ground her teeth in annoyance as the governor scratched notes in his ledger.

It was more than a minute before he looked up from his writing. “You will also be assigned daily cleaning duties until my schoolmistress is satisfied that you have learned how we do things here.”

“Privies!” The woman’s tone was swollen with triumphant glee as she added, “Starting now!”

\*

Charlie and Joseph held their breath as they watched the kitchen worker push a fresh strawberry tart into her gaping mouth. Warm, gooey jam oozed across her lips and light pastry crumbs tumbled across her apron as she slowly began to chew.

Suddenly, her eyes sprung wide open and her free hand flew to her chest. Charlie winced, fearing that he and Joseph had somehow poisoned her.

“Well, these are bang up to the elephant!” she announced loudly.

Joseph breathed an audible sigh of relief, and Charlie knew that ‘bang up to the elephant’ must be a good thing.

“Mmmm-mmmm.” The woman licked her lips and reached for a second tart. “These will make the master a gigglemug for sure. Now take them to him at once, before I go mad as hops and eat them all.”

\*

“Gigglemug?” Charlie repeated, as the two boys climbed a wide set of curving stairs, each carrying a plate stacked with Joseph’s delicious jam tarts.

The smaller boy gave Charlie a look that somehow blended suspicion with confusion. “You know... someone who smiles all the time.” Joseph and the kitchen worker could have been speaking a foreign language for all Charlie understood.

Joseph was busy hopping from foot to foot as he pointed towards a small room that was visible from the stairs. “Look! A flushing toilet. I’ve always wanted to use one of those.”

Before Charlie could reply, their progress was halted by the sobs of a young boy. He was perched on the top two stairs, spilling tears onto an opened book. Spotting Charlie and Joseph, he quickly wiped his face dry with his sleeve and shook life into a mop of blonde curls.

“What are you two staring at?”

The boy looked around twelve years old. He wore a smart blazer and short trousers with clean, white socks stretching down to shining, black ankle boots. His arms and face were much less angular than Joseph’s; it was clear that he’d seen a few more square meals.

“Nothing,” Charlie assured the boy. “We’re just working hard, as usual.”

It was only now, looking at this boy, that Charlie realised that this was the first person he had seen in Victorian York who looked completely clean. His skin was unblemished and his nails were free from dirt. Right now, the child’s pale, soft cheeks were flushed and wet with tears.

“How much effort does it take to carry a few cakes?”

“Tarts!” Charlie corrected him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“They’re tarts, not cakes. See?” He thrust the stacked plate towards the boy. “Strawberry jam. For the master.”

“Shame it’s not fruit curd,” the boy sniffed. “They’re my father’s favourite.”

Charlie gasped. “Your father? You mean, this is *your* house?”

The boy nodded. “Well, it will be one day, and the factory, too. Although, Father says that I’ll get nothing if I don’t improve my studies.” He waved his tear-speckled book at the pair. “Arithmetic is my worst

subject. I wish that I could stay at home all day and play with toys like my little brother does.”

The boy glanced over his shoulder, towards the open door of what was clearly a bedroom. Inside, the floor was awash with all kinds of brightly coloured wooden toys. Charlie saw envy colour Joseph’s cheeks as they both stared at a small army of beautifully painted toy soldiers, carved spinning tops and what looked like an entire clockwork train set. There was even a rocking horse standing taller than Joseph. Remembering the handmade toys that he’d spotted through the window of the artisan’s cottage, Charlie wondered at the difference between the two boys’ lives.

“I wish that arithmetic had never been invented,” the boy continued to grumble. “Sometimes, I wonder if the ancient Greeks invented it as a kind of torture.”

“Oh, I love maths,” Charlie boasted.

The boy thrust his book into Charlie’s hand and pointed to a list of calculations. “Do you understand these?”

“Nine times tables? That’s easy!”

“Easy?” The boy gasped. “I’m terrible at it. The schoolmaster called me stupid last week and all the other boys laughed at me. If Father knew that, he’d give me the birch himself.”

The boy’s eyes were filled with hope as he grabbed Charlie’s wrist. “Will you help me?”

\*

“So, tell me again,” asked the boy, ten minutes later. “How do I know if my answer is correct?”

“Because the two numbers will always add up to nine. See...” Charlie tapped the list of answers he’d scribbled in the boy’s book. “Five and four add up to nine. Six and three add up to nine. Seven and two add up to nine...”

“...and eight and one add up to nine!” The boy grinned. “I can’t believe that it’s so simple. I wish that you were there to help me every day.”

Modesty jerked Charlie’s shoulder’s into a shrug, seconds before the creak of floorboards told them that somebody was heading towards them.

“Nathaniel, what are you doing?” The enquiring voice was so loud that Charlie’s ears throbbed. “I thought that I told you to spend your time studying.”

“Oh, Father! I, erm... we...”

Nathaniel’s father was the best-dressed man that Charlie had ever seen. His brown tweed suit was perfectly tailored around his solid frame and the collar of his white shirt was folded and buttoned so precisely that it could have been carved from a block of chalk. A wonderfully coiffed nest of rusty curls framed a handsome face, and eyes the same colour as Nathaniel’s peered down at the three boys with a stern intelligence.

“Nathaniel was teaching us arithmetic, Master Thompson,” Joseph lied.

Charlie swallowed a gasp. This was Master Thompson, the factory owner!

“Arithmetic?” Master Thompson let a snigger slide from his lips, ruffling Nathaniel’s hair. “If my son was teaching you arithmetic, then I don’t hold out much hope for you.”

“Actually, *they* were teaching *me*, Father!”

Master Thompson gave Charlie and Joseph a puzzled glance before folding his arms across his chest. “Don’t be ridiculous. Boys like these don’t attend school! I pay a small fortune for your education, Nathaniel. What could these two illiterate servants possibly teach you?”

Charlie blinked, letting Master Thompson’s words sink in. Had Joseph really never attended school in his life?

Nathaniel shuffled anxiously. “Well, my nine times table. Charlie knows lots of things, I’ll bet.”

Master Thompson turned to look at Charlie. “Seven nines?”

Charlie didn’t even have to think. “Sixty-three.”

“Twenty nines?”

Charlie sang like a darts commentator, “One hundred and eighty!”

Nathaniel’s eyebrows hopped with amazement as his father leaned towards Charlie.

“Hmmm, quite the parlour trick,” he said. “Now, for some really hard questions: What is the square root of one hundred and forty-four?”

Smiling, Charlie replied, “I thought you said these would be hard – twelve.”

Clearly irritated, Master Thompson asked, “Who discovered the Americas?”

“Christopher Columbus, in fourteen ninety-two. Although, I think that the native Americans would say that it was them.”

“You have impressive knowledge for a servant boy, especially one so young.” The master’s light brown eyes shone with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. “If I didn’t have a factory to run, I’d ask you where you acquired such knowledge.”

Charlie shrugged, then spotted an opportunity. “Hey, funny you should mention your factory. Joseph and I want to –”

Dismissing Charlie’s words with a sharp wave, Master Thompson grabbed him by an arm. “You will accompany my son to his school classes this afternoon.”

Charlie tried to squirm free. “Uh, no. I can’t. I need to talk to you about –”

“A real servant boy would never know the answers to those questions. I want to know if you’re as bright and educated as you appear to be...”

He dropped his voice to a whisper as he leaned close to Charlie’s ear.

“...and if you are, I want to know why you’re here.”



## Chapter Twelve

### The Wrong Queen

The master's footman delivered Charlie and Nathaniel to the schoolhouse in a horse-drawn carriage. The painted, black wood was polished to a shine and inside, cushioned seats and velvet curtains made Charlie feel like royalty.

"The schoolmaster is very strict – nothing at all like my old governess – and the other boys are all older than me," Nathaniel had admitted during their journey. "I don't think they like me."

Joseph had been left behind to tend tomatoes in the master's greenhouses and, as the stern-faced footman led both boys into the classroom, Charlie would have happily traded places with his friend.

Charlie counted eight well-dressed boys seated in pairs at identical benches. Unsmiling faces tracked the two arrivals until they had taken their seats at the back of the class.

"Where are the girls?" Charlie asked.

Nathaniel laughed, "At home, learning, of course!"

"At home? What do they learn at home?"

Nathaniel paused, momentarily stumped. "Oh, I don't know – girl things, I suppose. How to run a house and raise a family."

Charlie watched the footman whisper a message into the schoolmaster's ear. When he left, the schoolmaster picked up a thin cane and pointed it towards the back of the room.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you and your friend, Thompson. Make sure that he behaves himself."

“Is he always this friendly?” Charlie whispered as the teacher perched himself on the edge of a large desk.

The man’s tightly fitted black suit reminded Charlie of the ones that he’d seen undertakers wear. This sombre attire and the teacher’s stern and emotionless expression were so different to the way that Charlie’s own teacher dressed and behaved. Back in his own time, classrooms were alive with colour, laughter and excitement, and his teacher was always happy to see him. Pulling his gaze away from the man, Charlie glumly scanned the room. The walls were white and mostly bland – only one contained anything resembling a poster, and that was just a hand-printed strip of the letters of the alphabet.

Behind the teacher, a two-sided blackboard was smeared with badly cleaned chalk scribbles. On a cupboard beside the teacher’s desk was a square, wooden frame housing ten horizontal rows of coloured beads. Charlie recognised this as an abacus.

A sharp tap on the desk from the schoolmaster’s long, birch cane dragged Charlie’s gaze to the front of the classroom.

“Slates and chalk at the ready,” the teacher grizzled. “We will recount yesterday’s history lesson.”

Nathaniel lifted the top of his desk and retrieved what looked like a miniature blackboard and a worn stick of chalk. Charlie remembered that the children used this instead of a pen and paper. The boys cleaned their slates by spitting on the previous day’s scribbles then wiped it clean with their coat sleeve.

“What kind of lessons do you have here?” Charlie whispered.

His companion leaned close and whispered, “The three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. History, some drawing, and drill, but only if the master is in a good mood.”

“Drill?” Charlie asked.

Nathaniel nodded. “Out in the yard, even when it’s raining.” He shivered. “I think Master Rowe used to be a captain in the army. He makes us march on the spot, skip with ropes, hop, lunge... sometimes, I prefer doing his arithmetic instruction to drill.”



Charlie laughed out loud. “Oh, you mean PE!”

The schoolmaster cleared his throat loudly and Charlie looked up to find the man’s piercing gaze fixed upon him.

“Perhaps, since he is clearly unable to hold his tongue, our guest would like to show us how intelligent he is.” The schoolmaster’s suggestion sent a ripple of worry across Charlie’s belly.

As the rest of the class turned in their seats and stared at the new boy, Master Rowe asked his first question. “I’ll begin with a simple question: tell me the year that Queen Elizabeth was crowned.”

Charlie almost slapped the desk in glee. This was easy. “Nineteen fifty-two.”

Charlie heard Nathaniel gasp beside him as a symphony of chuckles and sniggers burst from the other desks. The rap of Master Rowe’s cane quickly restored the silence. “I beg your pardon, young man?”

He felt a sharp kick to his shin as Nathaniel hissed, “Charlie, what are you doing?”

“Answering his question. That’s what we’re supposed to do, isn’t it?”

The schoolmaster began a foreboding prowl towards them. Nathaniel shook his head and muttered, “Yes, but only when we know the correct answers!”

“Congratulations, young man. You have managed to do the unthinkable...”

As the schoolmaster’s shadow fell across their desks, Charlie began to understand what Nathaniel meant. He was struggling to swallow a large gulp of realisation when the end of the teacher’s cane slammed onto the wooden worktop.

“...you’ve taken the title of ‘most stupid student’ from your friend, Nathaniel.”

Charlie couldn’t believe that he had been so careless. Queen Victoria’s great-great-granddaughter wouldn’t be born for another eight decades. The schoolmaster had been asking about the first Queen Elizabeth. When Charlie cast his embarrassed gaze towards the teacher, he was met with a sneer of total ridicule.

At the front of the class, a tall boy with sandy hair had already leapt to his feet. “Master! Master! Should I bring the hat?”

Master Rowe nodded. “Bring the stool as well, Fletcher. This boy’s stupidity deserves a special level of punishment.”



Standing on a stool in the corner of the school room for three hours was not Charlie’s idea of fun. Any shred of dignity did a runner as soon as the schoolmaster placed the pointed dunce’s hat atop his head. Laughter and jibes from Fletcher and the other students painted his cheeks the colour of a radish.

“Tell your father to keep this boy in the back of his house, where he belongs!”

Before Charlie could get himself into any more trouble, Nathaniel hurried him towards the door.

“Come on Charlie, let’s get back home.”

The footman who had brought them to the school was waiting outside. Once inside the carriage, Nathaniel pulled the velvet curtains closed and leaned towards Charlie. “You were brilliant today!”

Charlie shook his head. “What do you mean? I was a laughing stock.”

“I know! I’ve never seen acting quite like it. Nobody is that stupid! Getting the schoolmaster’s question so wrong was a stroke of genius. You’re so clever!”

Nathaniel grabbed Charlie’s shoulder and gave him a grateful shake. “That’s the best day I’ve had at school for years. I’ll ask Father if you can accompany me every day.”

“I don’t understand,” Charlie admitted. “How can me being stupid help you have a good day at school?”

“Because it’s normally me who Master Rowe makes stand in the corner. I’m usually the class dunce.”

Now Charlie understood. Poor Nathaniel clearly hated going to school and with Charlie there to deflect ridicule from him, he had actually enjoyed his day.

“You should think yourself quite fortunate,” Nathaniel told him. “When the master’s in a really foul mood, he beats us with his shoe.”

“His shoe?”

“Or his cane,” Nathaniel rubbed the back of his hand. “That really hurts!”

Charlie struggled to imagine his own teachers ever wanting to punish him in those ways.

“For the first time in months, I actually learned something,” Nathaniel grinned. “You must let me know how I can thank you.”

Charlie was about to dismiss his new friend’s offer when a sudden thought landed inside his mind.

“Well, there is something,” he told Nathaniel. “There’s a question I need to ask your father.”



## Chapter Thirteen

### Trouble for Tilda

Hours later, back in the girls’ dormitory, Alice lay on their shared bed with her back to Tilda, crying softly onto the thin mattress. She hadn’t spoken to Tilda since the incident in the schoolroom.

Cleaning the workhouse toilets had been exhausting and Tilda cradled her aching arms as she tried to ignore the growling of her empty stomach. She

wondered guiltily where Alice had been taken for her meal and who she had been seated with. Tilda had been so sure of herself when she had stood up to the schoolmistress earlier, but now she wished more than anything that she had been allowed to eat supper with the other girls.

Besides, what had Tilda's little speech achieved? In the classroom, she had felt frustrated by all those girls sitting obediently and not fighting for their right to learn more about those wonderful subjects that she could access back in her own school.

Yet now, as Tilda looked around the workhouse dormitory, she was hit by a sudden and sorry realisation. Although she knew that each one of the girls before her might be capable of owning factories or even running the country, the Victorian world wasn't ready for such a reality. Regret seemed to tie a knot in her throat as she recalled her own teacher's reminder that even in the twenty-first century, some women still had to fight for a good education. Clearly, one trip into the past couldn't change these girls' career prospects.

As she realised how strange her foolish outburst must have sounded, she leant over to rest her chin on Alice's

shoulder and whispered, "I'm sorry, Alice. I shouldn't have embarrassed you. I wanted to help you but I made things worse and I left you alone."

Alice rolled over. Her red and puffy eyes told Tilda that she had been crying for a long time. A weak smile creased her lips.

"I'll stay with you from now on," Tilda promised. "Even if it means learning to sew!"

Alice lay huddled beside Tilda. "She's making you clean the privies?"

"It could be worse," Tilda pointed out, rubbing the skin of her knees. "At least they gave me a cloth to use, although the floor is really cold and hard."

"No cheese for a fortnight, though."

"Well, I hate cheese," she lied.

"Looks like you're not the only one."

They both watched as several girls at the other end of the room squirreled portions of bread and cheese from their pockets, then handed them to Agatha,

who lay sprawled on her neatly folded bedspread. Judging by the weary looks on the girls' faces, this was a well-established arrangement. Tilda's stomach twisted with anger.

Agatha saw her watching and smirked. "Enjoying your new job?" She broke off a corner of the thick, creamy cheese and popped it into her mouth. "All that hard work must have left you feeling really hungry."

"Ignore her," warned Alice. "She wants to get you into more trouble."

"I know," Tilda said, gritting her teeth and stuffing her hands into the pocket of her pinafore.

She stared at her knees, made grubby by the workhouse privy floor, and concentrated on thinking about what Charlie might be doing. She hoped that he was just outside the walls, trying to find a way to get her out.

"I'd share some of this with you," Agatha drawled loudly through a mouthful of bread, "but it's just *so good*."

Tilda shifted her weight on the bed, trying to disguise the rumbling in her stomach. Perhaps disappointed

by Tilda's silence, Agatha leapt off her mattress and purposely strode over to Tilda and Alice's bedside.

She stooped to leer into Tilda's face, her pointed nose just millimetres from Tilda's freckled cheek. The smell of cheese mingling with Agatha's stale breath made Tilda flinch.

"I'm doing you a favour. If the governor hears that you've touched so much as a crumb, he'll have you sent to the refractory cell with the rats."

Tilda stared darkly into Agatha's narrow eyes, forcing herself not to blink. "Leave me alone!"

Agatha's eyes glittered briefly, but the older girl didn't move.

"You're a bully," Tilda hissed into the small space between them. "We have bullies where I come from, too, and they always get what they deserve. One day, someone will come along and put you in your place."

The tall girl's smile vanished. Agatha glared dangerously into Tilda's eyes for what felt like an eternity before standing upright sharply and striding back down the dormitory. She scowled pointedly

at any girls who'd been brave enough to watch the exchange.

Pleased with her small victory, Tilda settled down into her bed with Alice huddled beside her. The two friends soon fell into an uneasy sleep.

\*

What felt like only seconds later, Tilda was woken by the sound of a door being loudly thrown open. A ringing in her ears dragged her upright and, as her still sleepy eyes blinked to bring the room into focus, she saw Matron Watts marching up the dormitory towards her. Following closely behind, a smirking Agatha could barely contain her glee.

"THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!" screamed the matron.

The other girls, also woken by the loud bang of the dormitory door, cowered beneath their blankets as the matron thumped by. Alice was shaking, clutching at Tilda desperately with her pale fingers.

Matron Watts thundered to a halt at the end of Tilda's bed. "Explain yourself!"

Tilda stared at her, then at Agatha, in utter confusion. "What? What have I done?"

Agatha stepped in between them, her face a mask of feigned grief. "I'm sorry, Matron! She made me do it! She said that she would get me into trouble if I didn't bring her my supper to eat."

The matron raised an eyebrow and directed an impatient look at Tilda.

Tilda blinked up at her accusers uselessly, as her brain tried to wrap itself around Agatha's lies. "What? No! No, I didn't – you're the one who –"

"Look, Matron!" Agatha pointed at the space underneath Tilda's bed. "This is where she keeps it all."

Tilda almost laughed. "This is ridic-"

"SILENCE!" The red-faced matron glared from Tilda to Agatha and back again. "One of you is going to be in very serious trouble when the governor hears about this." She turned to growl at Alice. "You, girl! Show me what is under this bed."

Alice squeaked timidly before reluctantly crawling off the bed, her face contorted beneath a look of confusion and fear. Without taking her eyes off Tilda, she dropped to her knees and reached under the metal frame of the bed. When she stopped suddenly and her eyes widened, Tilda's heart jumped into her mouth.

As if in pain, Alice pulled her arms from beneath the bed, then slowly tipped pieces of bread and cheese onto the blanket. Beside her, a wide grin began to stretch across Agatha's face as the matron inhaled deeply, ready to explode.



## Chapter Fourteen

### Bed and Breakfast

As she stood in the governor's office for the second time that day, Tilda knew that Master Watts would be far less forgiving this time. He sat, looking tired, in his chair with Matron Watts standing beside him.

"I simply will *not* tolerate any act of behaviour which incites acts of wilful insubordination among

the other girls,” he growled. “Matron Watts tells me that it took her at least twenty minutes to calm poor Agatha down.”

Tilda sighed wearily, thoroughly worn out by the stresses of her first day in the wretched workhouse. “The food belonged to Agatha. She’s the one who stole it. All I did was...”

The governor slowly raised a hand. “It is clear that you have learned nothing from our previous sanctions. What is needed here is something altogether more extreme.”

Tilda didn’t like the look of victory that curled the matron’s mouth into an ugly smile as the governor issued his next instruction.

“Please ask Nurse Atkins to join us, Matron.”

\*

As Nurse Atkins packed her thermometer and stethoscope into a small leather medical pouch, she turned to the governor and said sadly, “Yes, she’s fit enough.”

“Fit enough for what?” Tilda gasped.

The governor scribbled an entry into a thick ledger, before closing the book with a weary thud. “Several days in the refractory cell should teach you to respect our rules. Basic rations of bread and water should teach you the value of food, too.”

“A cell? This is barbaric,” Tilda objected. “What about my human rights?”

The muscles in the governor’s jaw twitched dangerously; beside him, the matron’s fists were clenched so tightly, her knuckles had turned white.

Through gritted teeth, the matron growled, “The only rights in here are the ones opposite the lefts. Now, take her away, Nurse Atkins. I don’t want to see this girl again until she has learned how to behave!”

Nurse Atkins led Tilda away from the governor’s office. Two flights of stone stairs carried them towards the building’s cellar. The ceilings were low and the cold had a sharper bite, down here. Flickering orange candle flames fought a losing battle with the gloom and what light there was served only to paint dark shadows across the brickwork.



Nurse Atkins brought Tilda to a halt beside a dozing man. Drool slid across his chin and his grunting snores sounded like they should belong to a bear with bronchitis. The nurse woke him with two light kicks to his shin.

“Hey...! What...? Who...?” He shook and blinked himself awake.

“You were sleeping, Patrick!” chided the nurse. “The governor has dismissed porters for less.”

Patrick rubbed his eyes open as he climbed off his chair. “I wasn’t. My eyes needed a rest, that’s all. So, who’ve we got here, then?”

Tilda sought refuge behind Nurse Atkins’ shoulder as the tall man stooped to inspect her.

“This is Tilda,” the nurse explained. “She’s checking in for a few days.”

“Guest of the matron?” The porter offered Tilda a sympathetic nod.

“She’s new,” the nurse continued, “so go easy on her or you’ll have me to answer to!”

As he plucked a key off a row of hooks hammered into the wall, Patrick chuckled, “Half-board?”

“Nah, just bed and breakfast,” Nurse Atkins told him. “Governor’s orders. But slip an extra slice of bread through the hatch before supper. Let’s call it medicinal, shall we?”

Patrick steered them towards a heavy wooden door at the back of the cellar. Iron studs and metal straps made it look impregnable, as did the gaping lock that swallowed Patrick’s key. The mechanism ground and clicked defiantly as it was unlocked.

As the door swung open, it released a septic stench that struck Tilda like a slap.

“You’ll get used to the smell,” Patrick promised.

Tilda’s bed appeared to be a lumpy sack stuffed with straw. A small three-legged stool was the only nod towards luxury and Tilda tried not to think about why a wooden bucket sat beside it.

“I’ll try to smuggle down a blanket,” the nurse whispered as she left Tilda in the cell and Patrick moved to close

the door. In the growing dark of the tiny room, Tilda felt an unwelcome surge of panic bubbling inside her.

“I’m sorry for the lack of facilities,” the porter apologised. “The last occupant took the blanket with him when he left here this morning.”

“That’s theft, isn’t it?” the nurse complained on her way out.

“Not really,” Patrick explained as Tilda watched him slam the door shut. “The undertaker wrapped his body in it. Poor chap died in here last night.”



## Chapter Fifteen

### A Favour for a Favour

Master Thompson was hunched over his desk studying paperwork when Nathaniel led Charlie into his father’s magnificent office.

Charlie couldn’t help gasping as he gazed around the room. Bookcases stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Four beautifully upholstered brown leather chairs oozed opulence and comfort. Yet what held

Charlie's gaze the most was the enormous wooden replica of Earth sitting in one corner. He knew that his own father would love one of those in his twenty-first century antique shop.

"What is it, Nathaniel? You know how busy I am!"

Apparently immune to his father's irritated tone, Nathaniel skipped across the polished floorboards before depositing himself onto one of the leather chairs. He encouraged Charlie to do the same.

"We had a great day at school. Charlie was brilliant, Father!"

Nathaniel's father pushed his paperwork aside and glanced towards the two boys. A wave of recognition quickly gave way to annoyance.

"I have no time for this. I'm sure that this servant boy has lots of work to do downstairs. After all, that's why I pay him."

"We owe him more than a day's wages."

"We do?"

"Yes. Charlie just ensured that I had the best day ever at school."

The news brought a sparkle of interest to Master Thompson's eyes and he leaned forward to get a better look at Charlie.

"Well, you have my gratitude, young man. But I still don't see what that's got to –"

Nathaniel interrupted, "He has something to ask you, Father."

"Oh," Master Thompson's face sagged with disappointment. "Well, if he's hoping for a pay rise, I'm afraid –"

Sensing that he had just one opportunity, Charlie blurted out his request. "I want you to help me get my friend's mum out of debtor's prison."

Resting his strong chin against fingers pressed into a steeple, Nathaniel's father offered a sigh. "I'm afraid you'll need the magistrate's help with that kind of request."

“No!” Charlie promised. “It’s your fault she’s there. You killed her husband.”

Nathaniel gasped. Master Thompson leapt to his feet, colour flooding his cheeks. The large man’s hands squeezed into tight fists and veins began to throb on the side of his neck.

“That’s preposterous!” he thundered. “I haven’t killed anyone!”

“Well, no. You didn’t *actually* kill him yourself, Sir,” Charlie added quickly, shrinking backwards. “What I meant to say was: one of your machines did. He was killed in your factory last year.”

“How dare you accuse my father of this?” Nathaniel fired an anxious glance towards Charlie.

Just as he thought Master Thompson might explode with rage, the man blew a long sigh and then plunged his face into both hands. “It’s all right, Nathaniel.” He peeled his hands away from his face and held up a hand to his son. “Your friend is speaking the truth.”

Nathaniel jumped out of his chair and stumbled backwards. “You mean, you *did* kill that man?”

“No, no, of course I didn’t. But I do remember a man dying, and the machine that killed him belongs to me.”

\*

After what felt like a lifetime of questioning, Charlie watched as Joseph’s tiny, timid frame shuffled into the office, and both boys stood to attention in front of Master Thompson’s desk. Although Nathaniel was stood by his father’s side, he seemed unable to look at either of the two boys. Dazed, Joseph stared fixedly down at the two plates of strawberry tarts sitting on the desk.

“Did you really make these tarts yourself?” the master asked, fixing the youngster with an accusing stare.

Joseph’s furtive glances betrayed his worry. Charlie realised that the younger boy thought that he was in trouble. “D-d-don’t you l-l-like them, Sir?”

“No, I certainly do not like them,” Master Thompson said.

Charlie could feel the smaller boy begin to tremble as the man held Joseph in a stern stare before devouring a tart in one eager bite.

“I love them, Joseph,” he grinned. “These are the best tarts I have ever tasted.”

As if sensing the young boy’s anxiety, Master Thompson reached across his desk and placed a hand on Joseph’s arm. “I understand that these were made using your mother’s recipe?”

“She’s a cook,” Charlie replied for his friend. “A very good one. But she fell ill and...”

He stopped talking when Master Thompson began shaking his head.

“You have told me all about the family’s struggles. I also know that my machines are partly responsible. So I’d like to help, if I can.”

“Help?” gasped Joseph. “How?”

Master Thompson snatched up a second tart. “Well, I’d like to begin by paying you for these tarts. How does seven pounds sound?”

“Seven pounds?” Joseph coughed. “For a few tarts? That’s –”

“No, you’re right,” Master Thompson admitted. “They’re worth far more than that.”

Charlie fought a grin when the master winked at him.

“What about a job in my kitchen for your mother *and* lodgings in my servant’s quarter for your family?”

Charlie had to be quick to prevent his friend from slumping to the floor. He scooped him up into his arms and slowly lowered his trembling frame into one of the leather chairs.

Joseph couldn’t stop shaking his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Your friend Charlie has explained your situation to me and kindly pointed out that there are ways in which I can help.”

“Oh?”

“And he’s right.”

“Oh!”

“I’ll send my footman to the debtor’s prison first thing tomorrow morning, to settle your mother’s rent debt,” Master Thompson explained. “And your quarters will be ready to move into as soon as your mother arrives. Until then, you will both stay here as our guests. Nathaniel, why don’t you show your new friends to the toy room?”

As Charlie swapped gleeful smiles with Nathaniel and his father, he suddenly noticed that Joseph didn’t appear to share their happiness. In fact, the small boy looked more worried than ever as he bolted upright in the chair and cried. “Wait! What about my sister?”



## Chapter Sixteen

### Sovereigns for the Slums

As the sun rose the following morning, Tilda rubbed her eyes and stared blearily at the small, barred window which provided the only light in her gloomy cell. She had hardly slept a wink since arriving; worry, exhaustion and fear had spent the night staining her face with tears. She had no idea where Charlie had spent the night – was he safe?

She was just wondering how long it had been since her last meal – and how long it would be before the

next – when a knock on the door disturbed her. She sat upright, eyes wide and dry for the first time since she had arrived.

“I hope that you’ve made yourself comfortable,” hissed a voice that she recognised. “I’ve heard that the rats leave you alone... at least until you fall asleep.”

Tilda slumped back onto her makeshift bed, a fresh lump forming in her throat. “Go away, Agatha! You’ve caused enough trouble already.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Agatha sang as Tilda heard a key began to turn in the lock. “I was hoping that we could come to an arrangement.”

When the door swung open, Tilda saw that Agatha was standing beside Patrick the porter.

The tall man shrugged. “She says that Matron Watts sent her.”

Agatha’s smile was as cold as the cell as she pulled a slice of thickly buttered bread from behind her back. “Speaking of food, the lovely nurse left this for you but I don’t remember seeing it on your menu of basic rations.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re enjoying it,” Tilda lied.

Agatha feigned disappointment. “I really did hope that we could be friends, Tilda. Us smart girls should stick together.”

“You, smart?” Tilda growled. “You’re nothing but a bully.”

Agatha’s false smile twisted into a grimace. “Well, I’m smart enough to steal food from the other girls and not get caught. Unlike somebody I could name...”

Before Tilda could respond, their conversation was interrupted by a third voice.

“It’s a shame that you’re not smart enough to look behind you before you make such a shocking confession.”

When Nurse Atkins emerged from the darkness behind Agatha, Tilda allowed herself a smile. When she saw who was standing beside the nurse, that smile turned into a howl of joy.

“Charlie!”

Tilda leapt to her feet and raced to greet her brother, throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing him so hard, she feared he might break.

“Tils, Tils!” Charlie gasped. “Ease up, I can’t breathe.”

Tilda gazed at her brother as hot tears washed her cheeks. “What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“I’ve come for you, silly! You’re free.”

“What?” Agatha shrieked behind them.

Nurse Atkins seemed to take great pleasure in explaining things to her. “Oh, haven’t you heard, Agatha? It turns out, Tilda and Alice don’t need to be here at all. A very wealthy benefactor has arrived and authorised their release. Alice left a few minutes ago.”

Agatha’s jaw slowly fell open.

“Is that true?” Tilda whispered to Charlie. “Can I really leave?”

“Yup! Right now.” Charlie grabbed his sister’s hand. “I tried to come sooner, but Master Thompson said

that it had to wait until this morning – and it turns out that these adults really don’t like it when you argue. He’s sorted everything, though! It’s amazing what you can do here when you’ve got a bit of money. Mrs Baxter is out of debtor’s prison and the whole family will be working and living in a house straight out of those period dramas you and Mum love. Tils, you should see it!”

Tilda jerked her hand free. “Wait a minute, Charlie. There’s something that I need to do first.”

She turned to Nurse Atkins as she jabbed a finger towards Agatha. “You heard what she said about stealing the food, right?”

Nurse Atkins nodded. “Every single word.”

Tilda watched the friendly nurse take the key from the jailer’s hand, before asking, “What kind of punishment do you think the governor would issue for a crime like that?”

“Oh, at least several days in the refractory cell,” the nurse replied with an exaggerated, breezy tone. As Tilda gleefully watched, Nurse Atkins stepped forwards, pushing Agatha into the cold cell.



Tilda could already hear Agatha sobbing in the darkness as Nurse Atkins closed the door and turned the key.

Grinning mischievously, the workhouse nurse tossed the cell key to the porter. “Just leave her to sweat in there for a couple of hours, Patrick. Who knows, maybe she’ll think about treating her fellows a bit more kindly in the future.”

\*

The two time travellers said goodbye to their new friends outside the door of the workhouse. After the adults had made Tilda and Charlie promise that they had somewhere safe to go, the children swapped teary hugs. Mrs Baxter blew kisses to their young saviours until the trio vanished forever behind a street corner. Nathaniel’s hand was still waving its farewell as his father’s carriage clip-clopped out of view. Soon, Charlie and Tilda were alone on the cobbles.

It took half an hour of walking before either of them began to recognise any landmarks.

“Look, that’s the artisan’s cottage,” Charlie pointed out.

“That must mean that the slums are just around that corner,” Tilda repelled the smell with a waft of her hand. “We must be near the gate.”

It was almost dusk, yet the hustle of the cobbled streets had still to calm down.

Dirty-faced children still chased each other, hurdling the stream of filth that seemed a permanent fixture. Groups of women exchanged even more gossip.

“I still can’t believe that you convinced the factory owner to help Mrs Baxter and her children,” Tilda said as they tried to navigate the slums unseen.

“Shows how persuasive I can be, I guess. Maybe I should become a politician.”

“You should be very proud of yourself, Charlie Hacker! I thought that poor Alice was going to be stuck in the workhouse for years. And now, Master Thompson will enjoy Mrs Baxter’s cooking, too. I hear that she’s very good.”

“Well, her recipe for jam tarts was certainly a hit.” Charlie pulled a small pouch from his trouser pocket. It jangled as he bounced it on his palm.

When Charlie tipped the contents out across his hands, both children stared down at seven golden coins.

“I think they’re sovereigns.” Tilda prodded one of the coins. “Solid gold. How did you get those?”

“Master Thompson insisted on paying me for my plate of jam tarts, too.”

Tilda whistled. “Dad can sell genuine antiques like these in his shop for hundreds of pounds. Maybe thousands. We’ll all be *rich*, Charlie!”

Tilda’s enthusiasm was disturbed by a sudden voice.

“You two still lost?”

When the two children turned around, they found themselves staring into a haggard face that they instantly recognised.

The beggar woman’s greasy hair was still scraped across her head and her skin seemed even dirtier. Yet the hostility that had blazed from her blue eyes had now been replaced with desire.

“What have you two got there? Let me see.”

Charlie had to act quickly to prevent the woman from snatching his coins. As he backed away from her instinctively, his eyes took in her image. He looked from her dirt-stained fingers to her tattered clothing and his mind began to race. He looked to his left and right, at the families in their small homes and the small, barefooted children who had stopped to watch the scene.

He paused. Staring down at the coins in his hands, he said, “You know what, Tils? I reckon there are people here who need this money far more than we ever will.”

The woman’s eyes widened as she stopped in her tracks and waited, glancing back and forth eagerly between the two siblings.

Tilda stared at her brother, speechless.

Resolutely, Charlie took a step forwards and handed a single, shining sovereign to the thin woman. She turned it over in her hands, stunned, and frowned suspiciously back at him.

Taking advantage of the woman’s momentary astonishment, Charlie approached a group of four

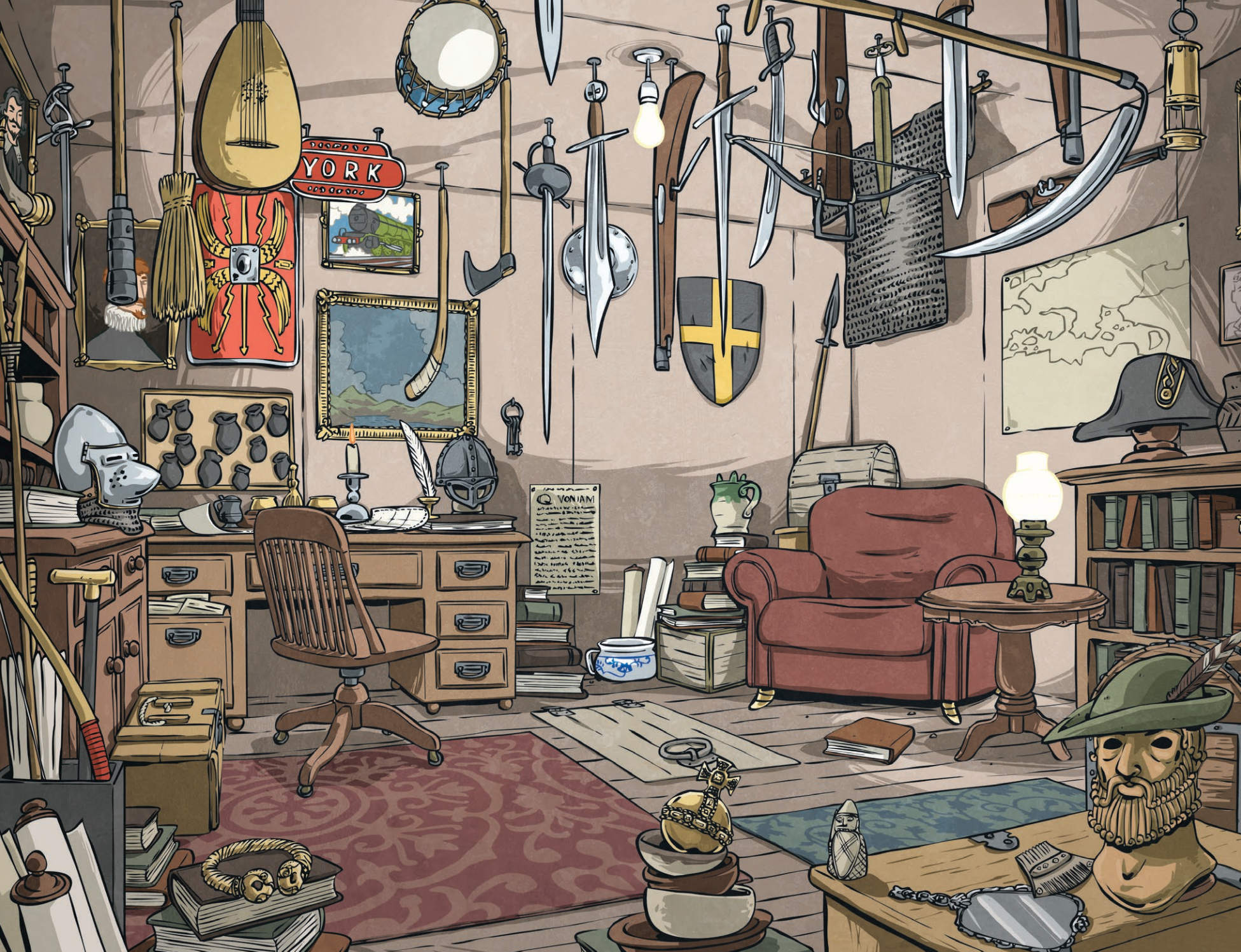
small children, crouched and handed a gleaming coin to each of them. He murmured instructions and, as he stood up, each infant hurried to a different adult sheltering in a doorway on the street, clutching their treasure tightly.

“Come on, Tils,” said Charlie as he began to skip away from them all. “I think the way home is just down here.”

Tilda watched him with a satisfied smirk on her lips. “You know, you could have given thousands to good causes back home,” she reminded him as she followed him towards a familiar-looking door. “There are still millions of people in the twenty-first century who aren’t as lucky as us.”

“Yeah, but these poor people need it *now*, Tils. Besides, who said I gave away *all* of the coins?” He waved two golden sovereigns at his sister before stepping off the cobbles.

“First one home keeps it all!”

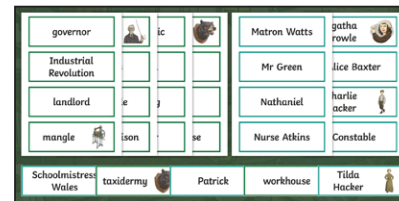
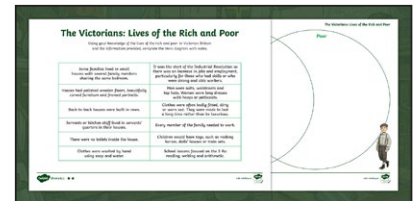


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Agatha's laughter chased them down the dormitory like the rattle of machine-gun fire. "You don't get food unless you've earned it - and you don't earn it unless you work. That's why they call this place a workhouse."

For Tilda and Charlie Hacker, travelling in time is nothing new. So when a disagreement starts about whether life in Victorian times was dismal or distinguished, there's only one way to find out. However, what started as an easy trip into the past soon turns into an eye-opening adventure as the pair discover that life in the 1840s isn't quite what either of them imagined.

Can Charlie escape the cruel landlord and convince a factory master to help his friends? How long can Tilda survive in the workhouse? Join the time-hopping Hackers on their newest adventure to discover what life was really like for Victorian children...