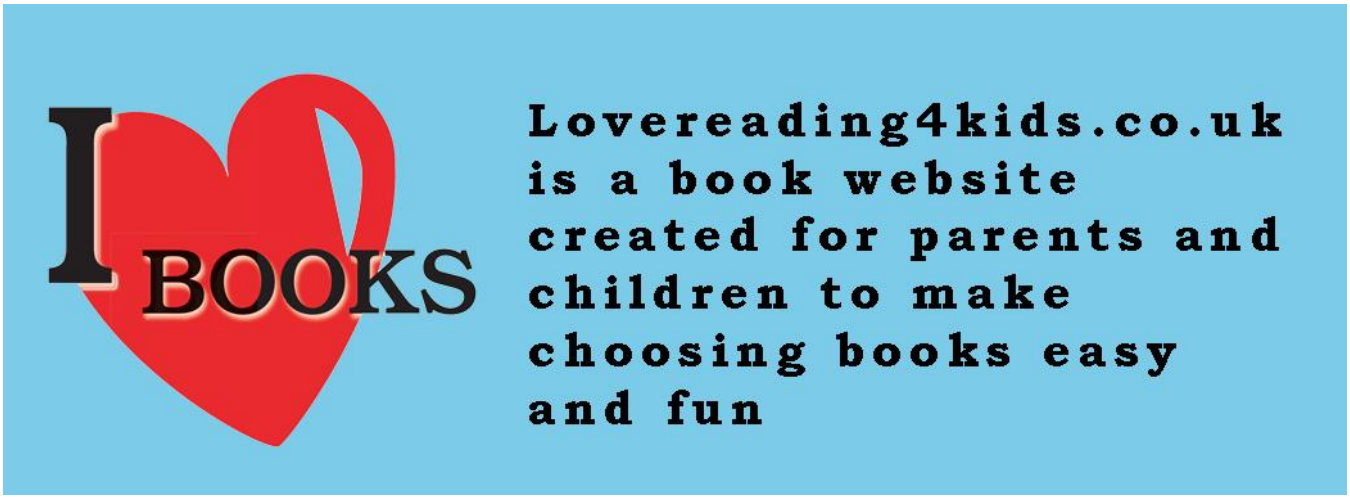


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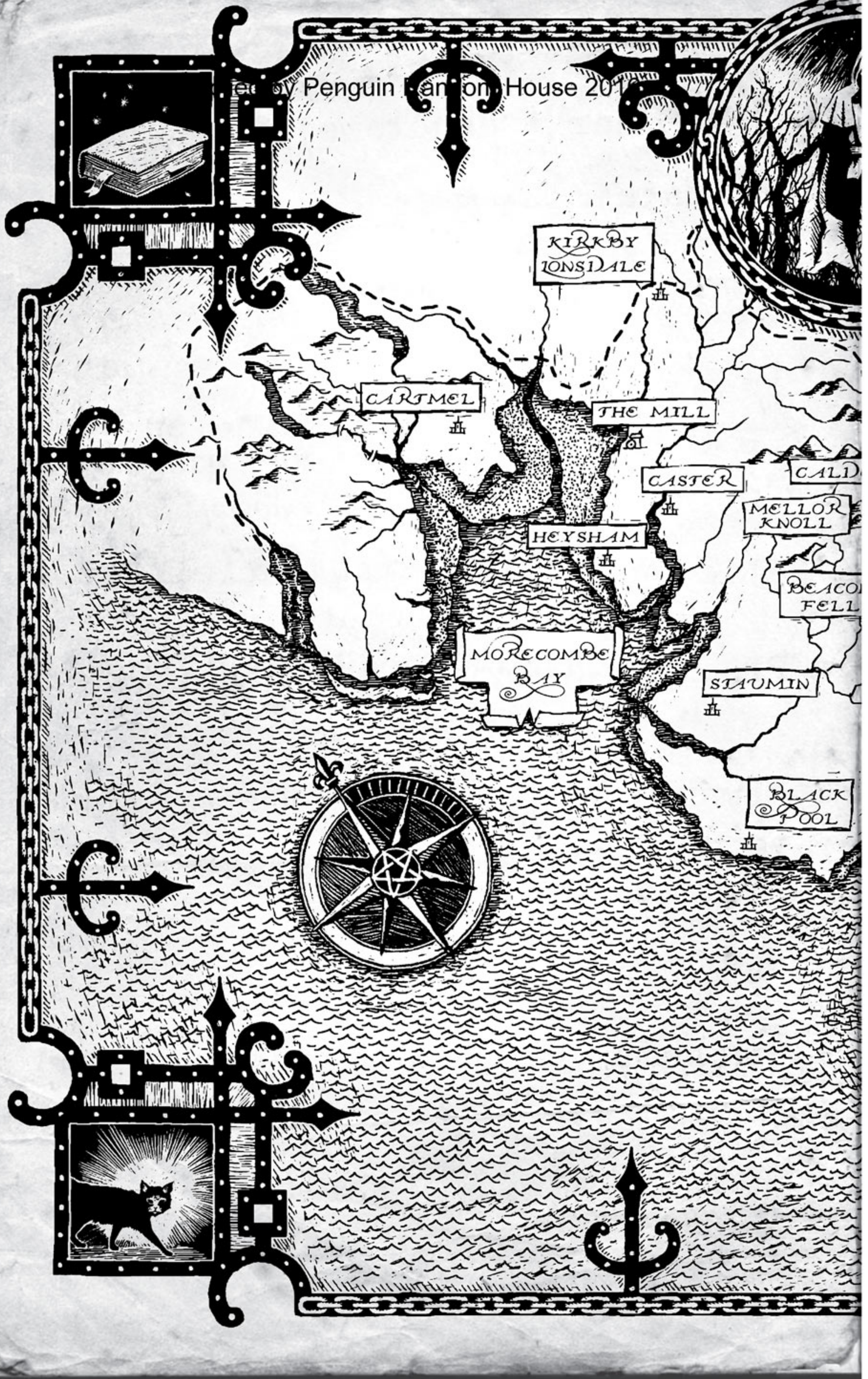
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ER FELL

STAKE HOUSE FELL

READ HALL

CHIPENDEN

LONGRIDGE

JEFFREY HILL

BREWER S FARM

GRIMSARG

PRIESTOWN

ANGELZARKE

TOPLEY

ADLINGTON

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CHAPTER 1
A MYSTERIOUS DEATH



THOMAS WARD

There was a cold draught coming from somewhere; maybe *that* was making the candle flicker, casting strange shadows onto the wall at the foot of the bed. The creaky wooden floor was uneven; perhaps *that* was why the door kept opening by itself as if something invisible was trying to get in.

But ordinary commonsensical explanations didn't work here. As soon as I'd walked into the bedroom I'd known that there was something badly wrong. That's what my instincts told me and they've rarely let me down.

Without doubt this room was haunted by somebody or

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something. And that's why I was here, summoned by the landlord of the inn to sort out his problem.

My name is Tom Ward and I'm the Chipenden Spook. I deal with ghosts, ghasts, boggarts, witches and all manner of things that go bump in the night.

It's a dangerous job, but someone has to do it.

I walked over to the bedroom window and pulled on the sash cord to raise the lower half. It was about an hour after sunset and the moon was already visible above the distant hills. I looked down on a large graveyard shrouded by trees, mostly drooping willows and ancient elms. In the pale moonlight the tombstones seemed luminous, as if radiating a strange light of their own, and the elms, which cast sinister shadows, were like huge crouching beasts.

This was the village of Kirkby Lonsdale, just over the County border, and although it was less than twenty miles north-east of Caster, it was an isolated place, well off the beaten track.

I went downstairs, leaving the inn through the front room, where three locals drank ale by the fire. They stopped talking and turned to watch me, but not one called out a greeting. No doubt any stranger to the village would have received a similar response – silence, curiosity, and a drawing together against the outsider.

Of course, there was an additional factor at work here. I was a spook who dealt with threats from the dark, one of only a few scattered throughout the County, and although I was needed, I made people nervous. Folk often crossed over to the other side

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of the street to avoid me, just in case a ghost or a boggart was hovering close by, drawn by my presence.

And as was the way of things in the County, by now, all the inhabitants of this isolated village would know my business here.

A voice called out me as I walked through the front door and out onto the street.

'Master Ward, a quick word in your ear!'

I turned and watched the landlord approach. He was a big hearty man with a florid face, full of forced good cheer – something that he had no doubt cultivated for the benefit of his customers. But although I was spending the night in one of his rooms, he didn't treat me like that. He showed the same impatience and superiority that I'd noted when he dealt with his staff and the man who'd delivered fresh casks of ale soon after I arrived.

I was the hired help, and he expected a lot for his money – which annoyed me. I had changed a great deal over the past few months; a lot had happened, and I was far less patient than I used to be . . . and quicker to anger.

'Well?' the landlord said, raising his eyebrows. 'What have you found out?'

I shrugged. 'The room's haunted, all right, but by what I don't know yet. Maybe you could speed things up a little by telling me everything you know. How long has this been going on?'

'Well, *young* man, isn't it up to you to find out the situation

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for yourself? I'm paying you good money, so I don't expect to have to do your job for you. I'm sure your master, God rest his soul, would have had the job done by now.'

With this last sentence the innkeeper had got to the heart of the problem; and it *was* his problem, not mine. John Gregory, the Spook who had trained me, had died the previous year. He had been fighting to help destroy the Fiend, the devil himself and ruler of the dark, who'd threatened to bring an age of tyranny and fear to the world. As his apprentice, I had now inherited his role and was operating as the Chipenden Spook. But, in truth, I hadn't really completed my apprenticeship and was young to be plying my trade alone like this.

Over the months I'd spent working alone I'd met quite a few people who shared this attitude. I'd learned that it was important to set them right from the outset. They had to understand that they were not dealing with a boy who was still wet behind the ears; young though I was, I had been well taught and was good at what I did.

'Mr Gregory would have asked you the same question that I just did, make no mistake about it,' I told the innkeeper. 'And I'll tell you something else – if you'd failed to answer, he would have picked up his bag and gone straight home.'

He glared at me, clearly unaccustomed to being spoken to like that. My dad had taught me to be polite and display good manners even if the person I was dealing with was rude. So while I stared back without blinking, I kept my expression mild and my tongue still. I waited for him to speak.

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'A girl died in that room exactly a month ago tomorrow,' he said at last. 'I employed her in the kitchen, and sometimes, when it got busy, she helped out by serving ale in the bar. She was fit and strong, but one morning she didn't get up and we found her dead in bed with a terrified expression on her face and blood all down the front of her nightgown. But there was no sign of any wound on her body. Since then her ghost walks, and I can't let the room – or any of the others, for that matter. Even down in the ale room we can hear her pacing back and forth. There should have been a dozen people taking that room by now, with more to come. It's affecting my business badly.'

'Have you seen her ghost?' I asked, wondering how strong the manifestation was. Some ghosts could only be *heard*.

'There's been no sign of her down here or in the kitchen. The sounds all come from the bedroom, but I've never been in there after dark when she walks, and I wouldn't ask my staff to do so, either.'

I nodded and offered him my best sympathetic expression. 'What about the cause of death?' I asked. 'What did the doctor have to say?'

'He seemed as puzzled as everyone else but thought it might have been some sort of internal haemorrhage – possibly in her lungs; since she'd coughed up blood.'

I could tell that the man wasn't convinced by this explanation, and indeed, he continued, 'It was the look of horror on her face that made us all uneasy. The doctor said seeing all that blood coming out of her mouth might have terrified her and

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caused her heart to stop. Or she might have carried on bleeding inside. To my way of thinking, he didn't really have any idea why she died.'

It was strange and horrifying. I had to get to the bottom of the mystery, and I knew the best way go about it.

'Well, hopefully I'll be able to tell you more tomorrow,' I replied, 'after I've talked to her ghost. What's her name?'

'Her name was Miriam,' the innkeeper replied.

With that, I gave a nod and walked off down the street. Before long I turned down a passageway that brought me round the back of the inn to the edge of the churchyard I'd seen through the bedroom window. I opened the ornate trellis gate and took the narrow path through the tombstones that brought me past the small church.

I needed a walk to stretch my legs and get some fresh air to clear my head. I wanted a bit of time by myself to think about the situation too.

In the County, it usually got chilly after dark, even in summer, but this was a warm night in late August – probably the last of the good weather before autumn cooled the air ready for winter.

I came to a slope which offered a spectacular view of a valley; the range of hills in the distance was bathed in moonlight. It was something that cried out to be painted and it held my attention for a long time.

Since John Gregory's death I'd changed a good deal. I still felt a sense of loss – I really missed him – but along with that there

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was also anger. A friend had been taken from me as well as a master. I now spent most of my days alone, with a lot of time to brood on things, but there was one source of solace. Increasingly, I'd come to appreciate the beauty of the country-side, with its varied landscape of meadows, woods, fells and marshes. This view at Kirkby Lonsdale was as good as any-thing I'd seen, if not better.

My mind wandered back to the cause of Miriam's death, and I sat down on a tree stump to allow my mind to mull over the situation. The girl had been young and strong, so there was a possibility of foul play. It wasn't unknown for a murderer to hide his own involvement by blaming witchcraft or some other supernatural occurrence. But there had been no wound . . . Maybe she'd been poisoned . . . Or it could have been a natural death, and the horror of dying in pain was what had brought that expression to her face.

I hoped to find out the truth soon enough. It all depended on what the ghost remembered of her own death.

After a while I retraced my steps through the churchyard and went back up to the haunted room. I closed the curtains, then pulled off my hooded cloak, hanging it on a hook on the back of the door. Next I tugged off my boots and lay down on the bed, fully clothed and ready for action. I was slightly nervous, as I always am when dealing with spook's business, but I wasn't afraid. I'd dealt with lots of ghosts before.

I've always been good at seeing in near-darkness, and once my eyes had adjusted to the faint moonlight filtering through

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the curtains, I studied the room carefully. There were shadows in the corners – a particularly dark one just below the window. I spent some time trying to work out whether it was natural or not. It wasn't. After a while, satisfied that it was nothing to be concerned about, I listened carefully. Sometimes you could hear ghosts before they wanted you to. Some rapped softly on doors or walls; others pattered across the floorboards, sometimes almost indistinguishable from mice.

This room was absolutely silent. I had a couple of hours, so I relaxed, closed my eyes and allowed myself to drift off to sleep.

I would sense the arrival of the ghost and wake up immediately.

Some time later, I woke exactly as I'd predicted. All spooks are seventh sons of seventh sons, and this means that we possess certain gifts. One was operating here: a cold chill that told me that something from the dark was close; it ran powerfully up and down my spine. Before I even opened my eyes I heard the sound of a girl weeping, and footsteps pacing back and forth beside the bed.

I looked at her. The ghost was that of a young girl, probably no older than seventeen. She had long hair pulled tight into a bun at the back of her head. Like many ghosts, she was very pale, all the colour having been left behind with death.

All the colours but one.

The front of her long pale nightdress was soaked in red blood from neck to hem.