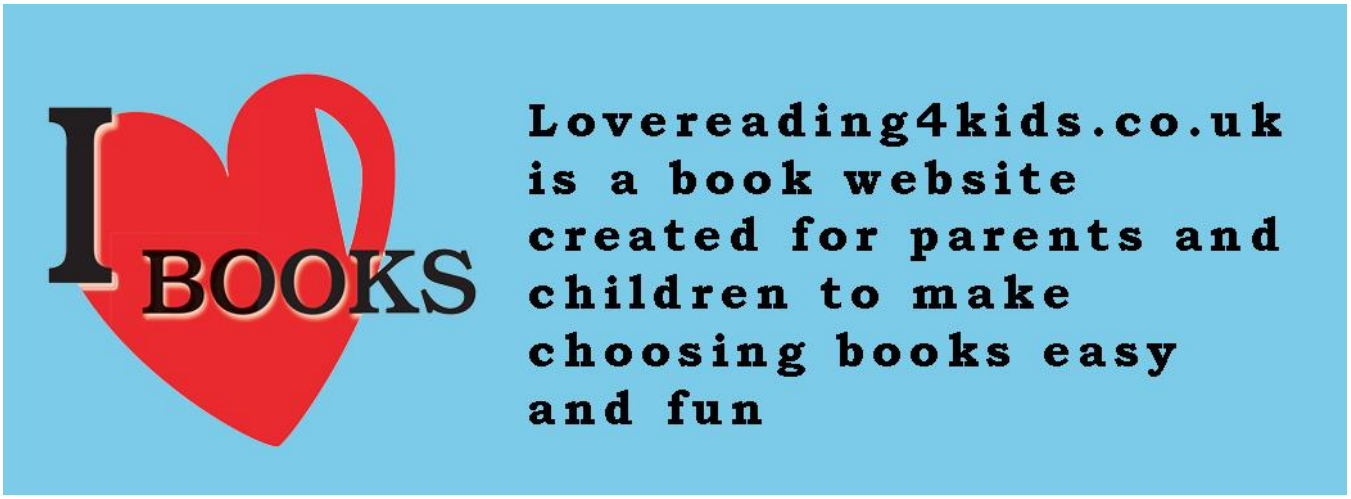

Opening extract from

Knitbone Pepper and the Last Circus Tiger

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Chapter 1

Playing Dead

Starcross Hall was Knitbone Pepper's idea of Heaven. Hiding down a grassy lane in Bartonshire, England, it had spelled H-O-M-E for generations of the Pepper family – both people and pets – for the last 904 years.

The tumbledown house had snoozed away the centuries, hugged by ivy and soothed by birdsong. Within its crumbling walls and rickety towers, there were interesting secrets; secrets that scampered round corners, waddled down its

echoing corridors and pattered through the half-abandoned rooms.

Normal house rules did not apply at Starcross Hall. Nobody ever said "Tidy up" or "Where are you going with that catapult?" No game was ever too noisy, too mad or too messy. It was never too late, or too early or too *anything* to play. It was the best adventure playground in the world and dogs were definitely allowed in. *Especially* ghost dogs.

Knitbone Pepper lay in the darkness of Winnie's bedroom, waiting inside the wardrobe with his paws over his eyes, counting to himself as patiently as he could. Hide-and-seek was his favourite game because it involved all the things that dogs liked doing best, i.e. sniffing, finding, chasing and fetching. He wiggled his eyebrows and gave his nose a thoughtful lick.

To pass the time, Knitbone worked on his strategy which, as he knew the other ghosts'

favourite hiding places like the back of his paw, didn't take very long.

Martin was bound to be in the biscuit tin, giving himself away with hamstery crunching and munching noises. Gabriel the goose would be perched on the top shelf in the library, squeezed next to the encyclopaedias. What about Valentine? A hare, he'd be lying low in the shady space under the big hedge in the courtyard. Orlando would be monkeying around in the kitchen cutlery drawer, clattering about amongst the spoons.

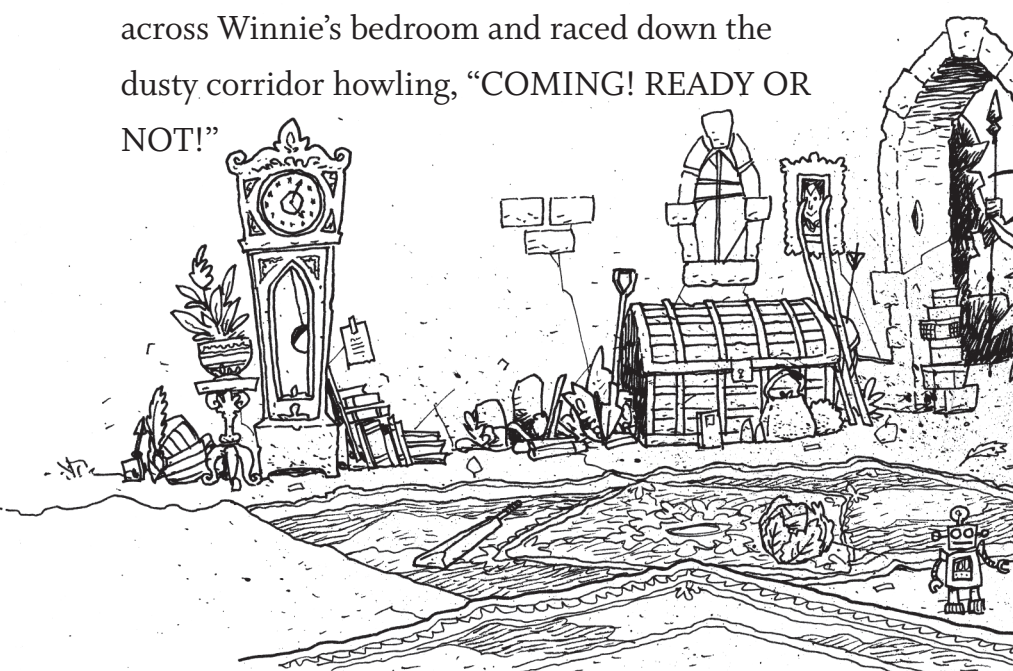
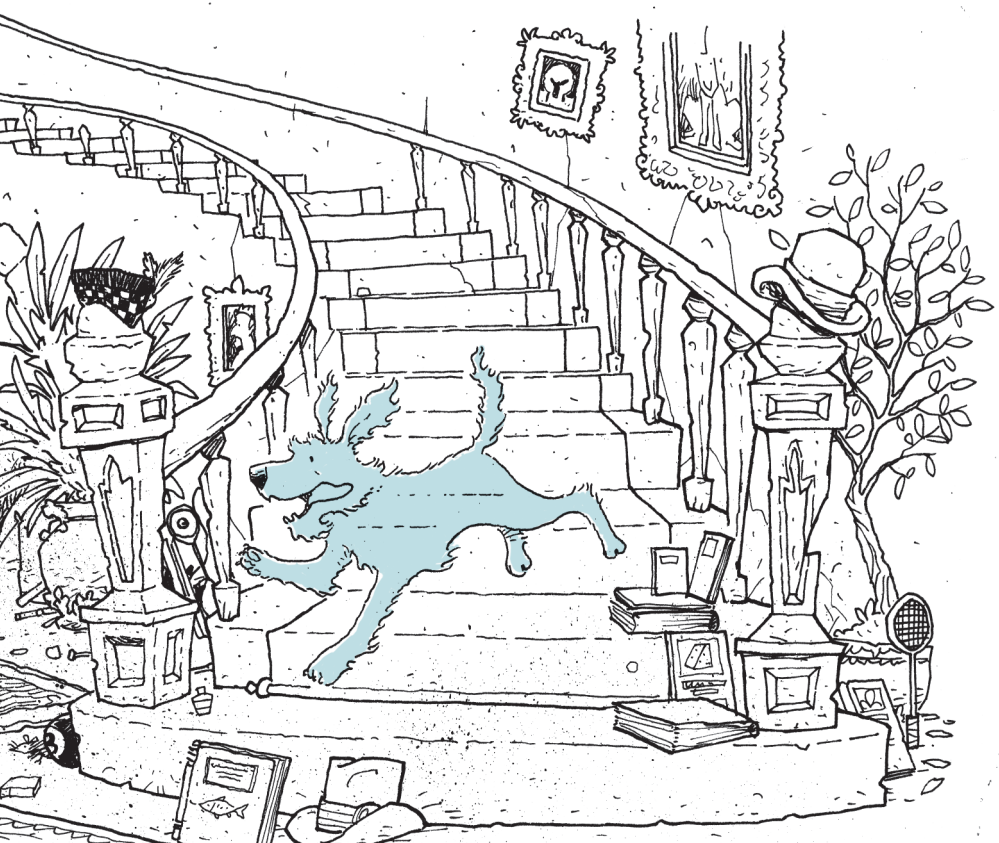
That just left wonderful Winnie Pepper. Knitbone was certain that she was the best and cleverest human person in the whole world, but even *she* couldn't hide from her beloved ghost dog

This was for three reasons:

1. They'd been playing hide-and-seek all Winnie's life (and some of Knitbone's death) and he never lost.

2. She smelled nicer than anything else in Heaven and earth so was easy to track down because her scent bowled down the corridors like clouds.
3. She was the only one in the group of friends who was a) human and b) still alive. Both of these things meant that she was very solid and was easier to spot than a frozen pea in an ice cube.

"Sixteen…seventeen…eighteennineteen TWENTY!" Knitbone shot out of the wardrobe, across Winnie's bedroom and raced down the dusty corridor howling, "COMING! READY OR NOT!"



Galloping down the sweeping Starcross staircase, Knitbone momentarily remembered that, once upon a time, he had been very sad. But now Winnie could see him again, his days whizzed by in a blur of doggy joy. Knitbone was Winnie's "Beloved": an extra-special ghost pet and her best friend for ever. His afterlife was dead good and he never, ever wanted things to change.