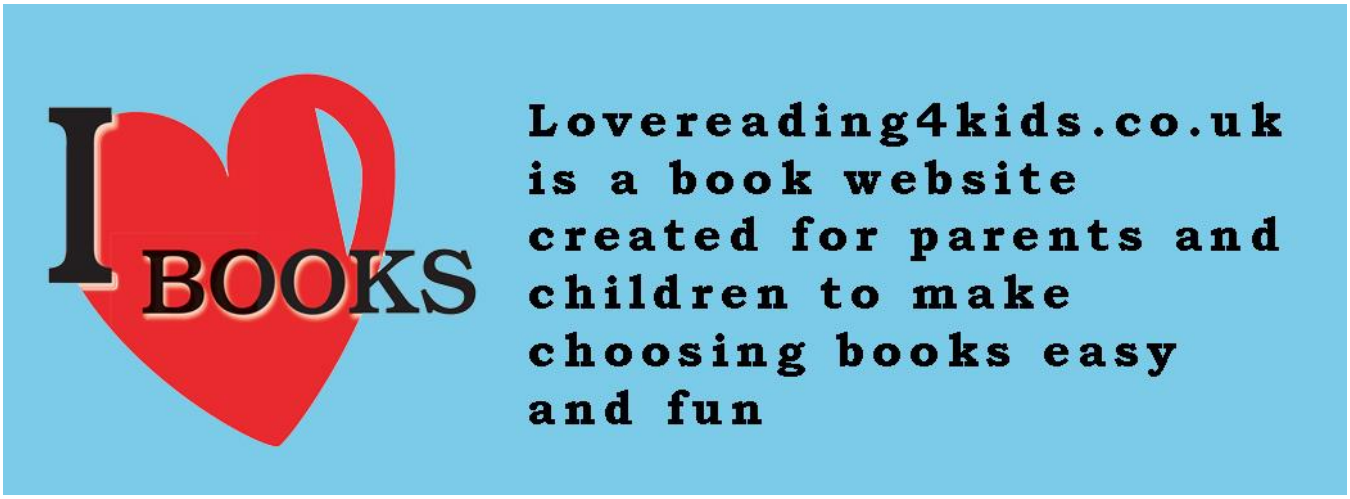

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Robin Stevens

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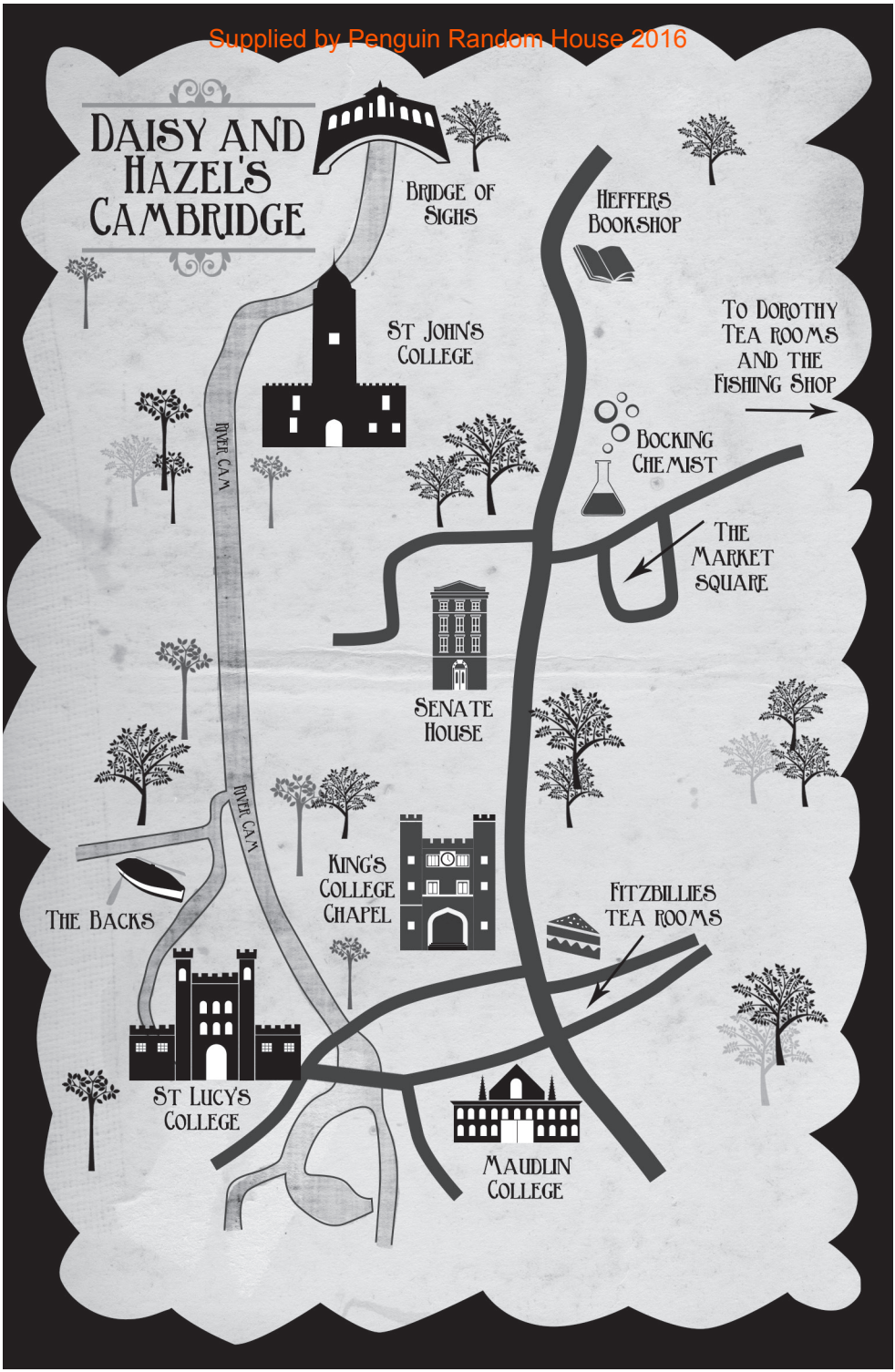

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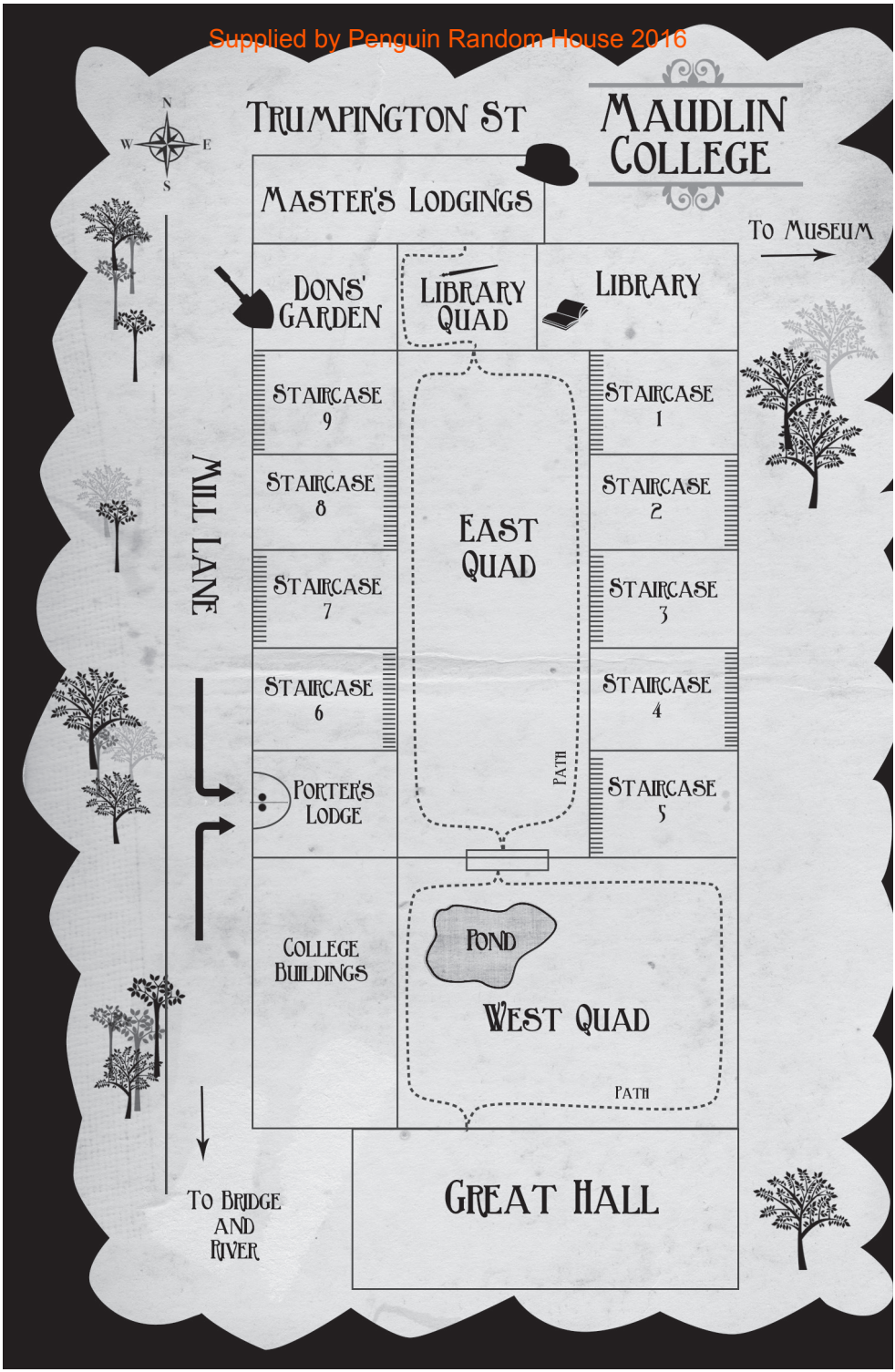

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PART ONE

THE DETECTIVE SOCIETY ON HOLIDAY

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1

'No one is dead – *yet*,' said Daisy darkly.

It was two days before Christmas, and we were sitting in Fitzbillies tea rooms in Cambridge. It was just Daisy, Alexander, George and myself, and as we sat there, I wondered if we would look odd to the grown-ups around us. Although Daisy is nearly fifteen now, tall and slender and with a most fashionable new fur-collared coat, my face is still round, and I am still disappointingly short. I suppose the grown-ups at the other tables thought we were only children, playing at being business-like – but if they knew what we were really talking about, they would be terribly surprised.

'I admit that this case does not *so far* contain a death,' Daisy went on. 'But that may yet still change. And if it *does* come to murder, then Hazel and I will certainly have the advantage. We have investigated—'

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'Four murder cases, we *know*,' said George. 'But that doesn't make you the better detective society.'

'We'll see about that,' said Daisy, glaring at him. 'So. Let's discuss this bet.'

You see, we are more grown-up than we seem because all four of us are detectives, members of two top-secret societies, the Detective Society and the Junior Pinkertons. Daisy and I really have solved four murder cases to date – and now it looked like we might perhaps be on our way to a fifth.

It was true that the information we had been given was slight, but as Daisy says, it is important for good detectives to seize every opportunity as it comes. In the day since Daisy and I arrived in Cambridge we have heard things and seen things that are highly suspicious. The fact that it is the Christmas holidays, and we are staying in a strange college in a strange city, will not be enough to stop us investigating. We are used to working in the most awkward situations, after all; we have done it before. Really, the most unusual thing about this case is that we will not be the only society investigating it.

You see, we have agreed to pit our wits against Alexander and George's society, the Junior Pinkertons, in the race to solve this new case. Daisy looks down on them for not having investigated any murders, but all the same I know that they are very good detectives.

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Alexander helped us with the Orient Express case last summer, and both Alexander and George assisted with the Bonfire Night murder only a month ago. Besides, I have heard from Alexander about some of the other cases they have solved – they are all quite hair-raising, and would have tested Daisy and me severely.

Of course, we have been up against opponents before as we have gone about our cases, but they have never *known* that we were in competition with them. Daisy and I have a very strict rule about keeping the Detective Society a secret from grown-ups. But I have the distinct feeling that working against Alexander and George will be far more difficult than outwitting Dr Sandwich, the foolish amateur detective who tried (and failed) to solve the Orient Express case too. After all, grown-ups always underestimate children. Children never underestimate each other.

I ought to explain, I suppose, how we first heard about this case. It all began yesterday, when Daisy and I arrived in Cambridge and met her brother Bertie.

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2

We took the train from Deepdean on Sunday morning. Matron waved us off from Deepdean station nannyishly and handed us sandwiches wrapped in wax paper (we ate them almost as soon as the train had pulled away, and then regretted it when lunch time rolled around). But, somehow, folding up the wax paper after our meal folded away the whole school term, the arguments and rivalries and especially the mystery we had investigated just after Bonfire Night. I breathed out, and felt all my school worries fading.

Daisy took out *Gaudy Night* from her bag, pressing it down so that the left-hand page touched my knee, and the right page hers. We were supposed to be reading it together – although really what happened was that Daisy turned the first twenty pages so quickly I could barely catch half the words, and then stopped and stared out of the train window at the bare, frosty hills