

JOSEPH DELANEY

SPOOKS



FROM THE
SERIES THAT
INSPIRED THE MOVIE

SEVENTH
SON

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A NEW DARKNESS

THE TIME HAS COME TO FIGHT ALONE

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About the Book

An army of beasts is gathering in the north.

They will invade our lands . . .

Enslave our people . . .

And spread their terror to the far corners of the earth.

A terrifying new chapter in the *Spook's* legend is about to begin . . .

JOSEPH DELANEY

SPOOKS



A NEW DARKNESS

BOOK ONE OF THE STARBLADE CHRONICLES

Interior illustrations by David Wyatt

RHCP DIGITAL

For Marie





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 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, ghastrs, 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 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 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.

‘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 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 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 countryside, with its varied landscape of meadows, woods, fells and marshes. This view at Kirkby Lonsdale was as good as anything 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 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.

CHAPTER
2
THE GIRL WITH THE MOUSY HAIR



I LOOKED AT Miriam's ghost and sat up in bed to face her. Then I gave her my warmest smile. I tried to be reassuring. 'Stand still, Miriam,' I said softly. 'Stand still and look at me.'

She turned towards me, gave a sob, and her eyes opened wide in astonishment.

'You can see me! Can you hear me?' she asked. Her voice had a slight echo to it and seemed to come from a distance.

'Yes, I can both see and hear you. I'm a spook and I've come to help you.'

'I've been asking for help for days, but nobody listens. Nobody even looks my way.'

'You mean up here in the bedroom?'

'No - I went down to the kitchen where I used to work. Nobody comes up here after dark.'

Ghosts could be seen lingering by their graveside, but usually they haunted the place where they had died. As a seventh son of a seventh son, I might have been able to see or hear her in places where other folk wouldn't.

'Do you know why that is?' I asked gently.

'It's because I'm dead,' she said, beginning to cry again.

That was good – an important first step. Some ghosts didn't know that they were dead: the hardest part of my job was convincing them of that fact before persuading them to move on.

'Yes, you're dead, Miriam. It happens to us all eventually. But now you can move on to the light. You can go to a better place than this world. I'll help you to do that, I promise, but first I need to ask you a few questions. Can you tell me how and why you died?'

The girl stopped crying, and an expression of terror came onto her face. '*Something evil killed me,*' she said.

I tried to keep my face calm, but my mind was whirring with thoughts. I was keen to find out what creature of the dark was responsible for this brutal murder.

'Something sat on my chest. It was heavy and I couldn't breathe. Then it sank its teeth into my throat and began to drain my blood. I could hear it sucking and snarling. Its eyes were red. It wore a long coat like a man's, but it was definitely some kind of animal because its arms were hairy and it had a long tail.'

I listened in astonishment to her description. This was completely outside my experience – I had never even heard of such a creature – but I tried not to reveal anything in my expression. I wanted Miriam to remain calm so that I could get as much information as possible from her.

The doctor had found no wounds on her body – including her throat – so could it be that what she was describing was really a nightmare she'd experienced alongside some sort of physical pain?

'It had happened before,' she continued. *'I'd felt that weight on my chest and woken up sweating and weak. And when I got out of bed I felt dizzy. But this was far worse. I could see its red eyes. The creature seemed to be in a frenzy – it kept on drinking my blood until my heart faltered and stopped.'*

‘Think carefully, Miriam. I want you to remember all you can about the creature. How big was it?’

‘*No! No!*’ She covered her face with her hands. Her whole outline began to shake as she sobbed.

‘Try, please, Miriam,’ I persisted. ‘The information you give me might help to save other girls in the future.’

‘*I’m sorry – I can’t. I’m not strong enough. I can’t bear to think about my death again. You said that you were going to help me. So please, please, help me now!*’

I’d heard enough. It was time to give her peace from this torment.

‘Listen carefully,’ I told her, coming slowly to my feet and smiling at her. ‘I want you to think of the happiest moment you ever experienced.’

She fell silent, and a puzzled expression came onto her face.

‘Think hard,’ I said. ‘Was it when you were a child?’

Quite often the happiest memories the dead retained were moments in their childhood; a time when they felt safe, protected by their parents; when life hadn’t yet had a chance to hurt them.

‘*No! No!*’ she cried out in some agitation. ‘*My childhood was unhappy.*’ She gave a shudder, but didn’t explain why this was so. Then, suddenly, the sides of her mouth curled up in a smile. ‘*It was when I came here to work. I had a room all to myself, and on the very first morning I saw the sun rise, bathing the hills in its warm glow. The graveyard directly beneath the window had seemed creepy the previous night. But now I saw that it was a peaceful place, well-tended, and flowers had been left by relatives who loved those they had lost. And beyond it was that wonderful view, with the valley rising up towards those hills in the distance. I felt lucky to be in such a nice place. I was really happy then.*’

‘Go back to that moment,’ I told her. ‘Feel that happiness again. The sun is rising, bathing the hills in light. Can you

see it?’

‘Yes! Yes! It’s so bright!’

‘Then walk towards it. Go to the light. You can do it. Just a few steps and you’ll be there!’

The ghost was smiling now. She took three paces towards the window and then faded away completely.

My task was over. She’d gone to the light, and that gave me great satisfaction. Often a spook fought the dark and found only fear and violence. It was satisfying to be able to help a lost soul like Miriam. This job had been far easier than most, but today that wasn’t the end of the problem.

The girl had mentioned something heavy sitting on her chest. I would have dismissed it . . . but for one thing. This was the third County girl who’d died in similar circumstances in the same number of months. And each ghost had given the same account of feeling a heavy weight on her chest. But Miriam was the first to have woken up and seen a creature feeding from her.

I was dealing with something very unusual. There was work to be done.

I returned to the house at Chipenden. I’d inherited it from my master and it was mine to live in as long as I worked as a spook. That suited me fine. As far as I was concerned, this was a job for life.

The following day I got up soon after dawn, picked up my staff and went out into the garden. There was a tree stump there that my master and I had routinely used for practising our fighting skills.

Soon I was driving the blade of my staff into the wood again and again until I was breathing hard and dripping with sweat. I was out of condition, a long way off my former peak of fitness.

The staff, with its retractable silver-alloy blade crafted to fight witches, was a spook’s main weapon, and I needed to regain my former skill in using it as soon as possible.

I tried the move in which I flicked my staff from one hand to the other before driving it into the stump. I was clumsy, so I kept at it until I felt I'd improved.

Since my master had died, almost ten months ago now, I'd done my best to deal with the dark, but I hadn't kept up my fighting skills. Gradually I'd done less and less. I hadn't had the heart, because it reminded me too much of the days when John Gregory and I had trained together. But now I realized that this must become a daily routine again. I needed to be ready for any eventuality. The death of the third girl had brought home to me the fact that I needed to keep both my wits and my skills sharp and continue to gather knowledge – there was still much I didn't know.

Before going back to the house I also practised for ten minutes with my silver chain – the spook's other main weapon – casting it again and again over the post in the garden. I was pleased to discover that my skill with this was undiminished. I didn't miss once. It had always been one of my strengths – I could cast it over a witch even when she was running directly towards me.

Pleased with myself, I headed back for breakfast. I'd built up a good appetite.

I sat alone at the table with a big portion of ham and eggs steaming on the plate before me. At one time I would have wolfed it all down and helped myself to more. But my appetite was poor these days and I only picked at my food.

During breakfast my master and I used to discuss previous events or our plans for the coming day. I missed all that, but of course I wasn't truly alone.

I could hear a faint purring.

It was the boggart, Kratch.

There were many different types of dark entities like this, and usually it was a spook's job to deal with them. For example, there were ripper boggarts who drank the blood of animals and people; stone-chuckers who threw stones. Both of these could kill, so a spook had to bind or slay

them. Other boggarts just played tricks on folk and scared them; they were usually just moved on to a different location – usually a deserted spot far from human habitation. However, Kratch was a cat-boggart, and although it was dangerous and could kill, my master had dealt with it in a different way.

This boggart cooked the breakfast and guarded the house and garden. In exchange, after issuing three warnings to any intruder, it was permitted to kill them and drink their blood. My master had made this pact with Kratch, and I had renewed it.

The creature rarely made itself visible, but when it did so, it took the form of a ginger tom cat which varied in size depending on its mood. The purring faded now, and I sensed it moving away from me. Moments later it appeared on the hearth rug, curling up in front of the embers of the fire. I wondered if perhaps it was some type of boggart that had killed the girls. But almost immediately I dismissed that possibility. For one thing, the murderous creature had worn a long coat, and boggarts definitely didn't wear clothes of any type. Secondly, none of the places where the girls had been killed were on ley lines – the invisible paths along which boggarts moved from location to location.

After finishing what breakfast I could manage, I went down to the village to pick up the week's provisions, calling in at the shops in the usual order: the butcher's, the greengrocer's, and finally the baker's.

In recent months the dark had been relatively quiet. Few had visited the withy trees crossroads outside the house to ring the bell that would summon me. However, I had spent much of my time thinking and trying to puzzle out what had killed the girls – so far, without success.

As I walked along the street, I received the usual furtive glances, and villagers would occasionally cross to the other side to avoid passing near to me. That was to be expected; but today there was something new. I felt that people were

whispering behind my back. It made me feel uncomfortable, but I ignored it and went about my business.

Carrying the full sack over my shoulder, I set off up the hill towards the house. As I neared the top of the lane, I saw someone waiting there.

A girl was sitting on the stile next to the gate. For a moment my heart leaped in my chest with a strange combination of anger and grief. It was Alice! Alice had been trained as a witch, but had later become my friend and had stayed at the Chipenden house with us. She had been gone for a long time now, but I still missed her. However, almost immediately I realized that this was not Alice, after all.

Alice was about my own age – seventeen – while this girl was at least a couple of years younger. She had mousy hair, freckles, and a bright, cheerful face. She was wearing a neat dark blue dress that came down well below her knees, and a pair of sensible walking shoes. At first glance you'd have taken her for a healthy farmer's daughter, but there was something about her eyes that was very unusual.

The left eye was blue and the right eye was brown.

Not only that – their expression was strange in a way that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Whatever it was, I knew instantly that she was no ordinary girl. I had no sensation of cold, so I knew she wasn't a witch, but there was something about her I didn't quite trust.

'Hello,' she said as I approached. 'Are you Mr Ward?'

'That I am,' I replied. 'Are you here to ask for help? You should have enquired down in the village what to do. You see, it's best to visit the withy trees crossroads and ring the bell. I'd have gone there right away and you wouldn't have had to wait like this.'

'I don't need help,' she said, jumping down and coming towards me. 'You're a new spook, aren't you? So you'll be looking for an apprentice. I'm applying for the job.'

I put down the sack and smiled at her. 'I'm sorry, but I'm not looking for an apprentice. Anyway, this is not a job that you can just apply for. You need certain innate abilities, even before you start; special talents that help you to fight the dark. I'm new to the job myself. My own apprenticeship was cut short, and I'll still be learning for at least a few more years. I'm hardly in a position to train anyone else, am I?'

'That's not a problem,' she said with a smile. 'We should spend all our lives learning, and I know you already have lots to teach me. I can help by doing chores as well. I could have collected your food from the village and saved you the bother. I could make your breakfast too - my mam says I'm a good cook.'

'I don't need anyone to make my breakfast,' I said, not bothering to explain that I had a boggart who did that already. 'How did you know I'd been down in the village collecting provisions?'

'I watched you going into the shops; then, when you went into the last one, I ran up here to wait for you.'

'How did you know it was the last one? Have you been spying on me?' I asked.

'I wouldn't call it "spying" - but, yes, I've watched you for a couple of weeks and I know your routine - you go to the butcher's, the greengrocer's and finish at the baker's shop. I've seen enough to make me realize that you are the one who should train me.'

'Listen, I'd better tell you what's what so that you won't get your hopes up. To become a spook's apprentice you have to be a seventh *son* of a seventh son. That gives you some immunity against witches and enables you to see the dead and talk to them. That's the basic qualification. I might as well be blunt. You're a girl, and you just don't qualify.'

I picked up my bag, nodded at her and started to climb over the stile.

‘I’m a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter,’ she said.
‘And I *can* see the dead. Sometimes they talk to me.’

I turned and looked back at her – a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter with those powers . . .? I’d never heard of such a thing.

‘I’m sure you can,’ I replied, ‘but I just don’t need an apprentice. Have I made myself clear?’

Then I headed for the house, putting her from my mind.

CHAPTER 3 BAD THINGS HAPPEN



I SPENT THE afternoon and evening in the library. The house had been burned to the ground a couple of years ago, and John Gregory's original library, a vast collection of books – some of them written by generations of previous spooks – had been destroyed.

The house had been rebuilt, but the library was far more difficult to replace.

Now the new shelves were mostly empty; they housed a very small collection of books. These included a few notebooks of my own and my master's – including his Bestiary, the illustrated dictionary of the entities he'd encountered during his years as a spook defending the County against the dark.

I sat at the desk and began to write up the happenings of the previous day in my notebook. I'm sure John Gregory would have had much to say on the subject, but I was alone now, and it was up to me to find an explanation. The library couldn't help me. I was getting nowhere and needed a plan.

The following morning I woke up early, no nearer to finding an answer to the mystery. It was too soon to go down to breakfast. The boggart became very angry if you

went into the kitchen before it was ready for you, and it was not wise to annoy such a dangerous creature.

So I went outside and strode towards the western garden. It was a good place to think. The weather had turned and I was surprised to find a thin coating of hoar frost on the grass. The air was unusually cold for late August, much colder than I'd expected. Even in the County, which was known for its long winters, we didn't usually get the first frosts until late September or early October. It could well be that winter would come early this year, more severe than ever.

I sat down on the bench and gazed towards the fells, listening to the birdsong and the hum of insects. This was where my master used to teach me. I would sit taking notes while he paced back and forth.

His grave lay near the bench, the mound of earth now covered with grass. I read the words on the gravestone. I'd chosen them myself.

HERE LIETH
JOHN GREGORY OF CHIPENDEN,
THE GREATEST OF THE COUNTY SPOOKS

The Spook had served the County well. He'd been a good master, and as I thought about him, tears came to my eyes.

I reflected on the years of training he had given me, and all his warnings against the dark; his instructions on how to deal with it. We'd faced many foes, but malevolent witches had been some of our most dangerous enemies. We had fought them, and captured them, and bound them in pits within his garden.

But a change had come. We weren't strong enough by ourselves, so we had been forced to compromise in order to have any hope of finally defeating the Fiend. So, even though it had made my master uncomfortable, we had