

THE SPOOKS SECRET

*The dark is
growing in power*

JOSEPH DELANEY

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

How to Read Spook's Symbols

Character Profiles

Map

Epigraph

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Visitor

Chapter 2: Farewell to Chipenden

Chapter 3: Home

Chapter 4: The Winter House

Chapter 5: What Lay Beneath

Chapter 6: A Nasty Piece of Work

Chapter 7: The Stone - Chucker

Chapter 8: The Stone Chucker's Return

Chapter 9: Intimations of Death

Chapter 10: Bad News

Chapter 11: Mam's Room

Chapter 12: Necromancy

Chapter 13: Trickery and Betrayal

Chapter 14: Snowbound

Chapter 15: Down to the Cellar

Chapter 16: Up to the Attic

Chapter 17: Home Truths
Chapter 18: The Chapel of the Dead
Chapter 19: The Round Loaf
Chapter 20: Golgoth
Chapter 21: The Trap
Chapter 22: For the Best
Chapter 23: Back to Chipenden

About the Author

The Wardstone Chronicles

Also by Joseph Delaney

Thomas J. Ward's Journal

Copyright

About the Book

WARNING: NOT TO BE READ AFTER DARK

'It's going to be a long, hard, cruel winter, son,' Mam said. '... And there couldn't be a worse place to spend it than up on Anglezarke ... The dark's growing in power and there's a particularly baleful influence up on that moor. It's where some of the Old Gods were worshipped long ago and in winter some of them start to stir from their sleep ... So stay close to your master. He's the only real friend you've got.'

As the weather gets colder, the Spook announces that it's time to move to his winter house on Anglezarke - a bleak, forbidding place, close to the dark with a deep cellar full of bound witches and boggarts.

Once there Tom finds himself discovering more and more about his master's past and the identity of a mysterious visitor, who it seems is the Spook's sworn enemy. If his master's secret past is finally revealed to the world, how much danger will Tom be in?

THE
SPOOKS
SECRET

JOSEPH DELANEY

Illustrated by David Wyatt

RED FOX

for Marie

How to Read Spook's Symbols

Boggarts

Beta for Boggart

B P ← ripper
X ← rank
Gregory ← name

B Naturally bound boggart

B Artificially bound boggart

I - dangerous

X - hardly detectable

Ghosts/Ghasts

γ I - dangerous
X - hardly detectable
X
Gregory

Witches

O M - malevolent
B - benign
U - unaware
M
Gregory

CHARACTER PROFILES

Tom

Thomas Ward is the seventh son of a seventh son. This means he was born with certain gifts – gifts that make him perfect for the role of the Spook’s apprentice. He can see and hear the dead and he is a natural enemy of the dark. But that doesn’t stop Tom getting scared, and he is going to need all his courage if he is to succeed where twenty-nine others have failed.

The Spook

The Spook is an unmistakable figure. He’s tall, and rather fierce looking. He wears a long black cloak and hood, and always carries a staff and a silver chain. Like his apprentice, Tom, he is left-handed, and is a seventh son of a seventh son.

For over sixty years he has protected the County from things that go bump in the night.

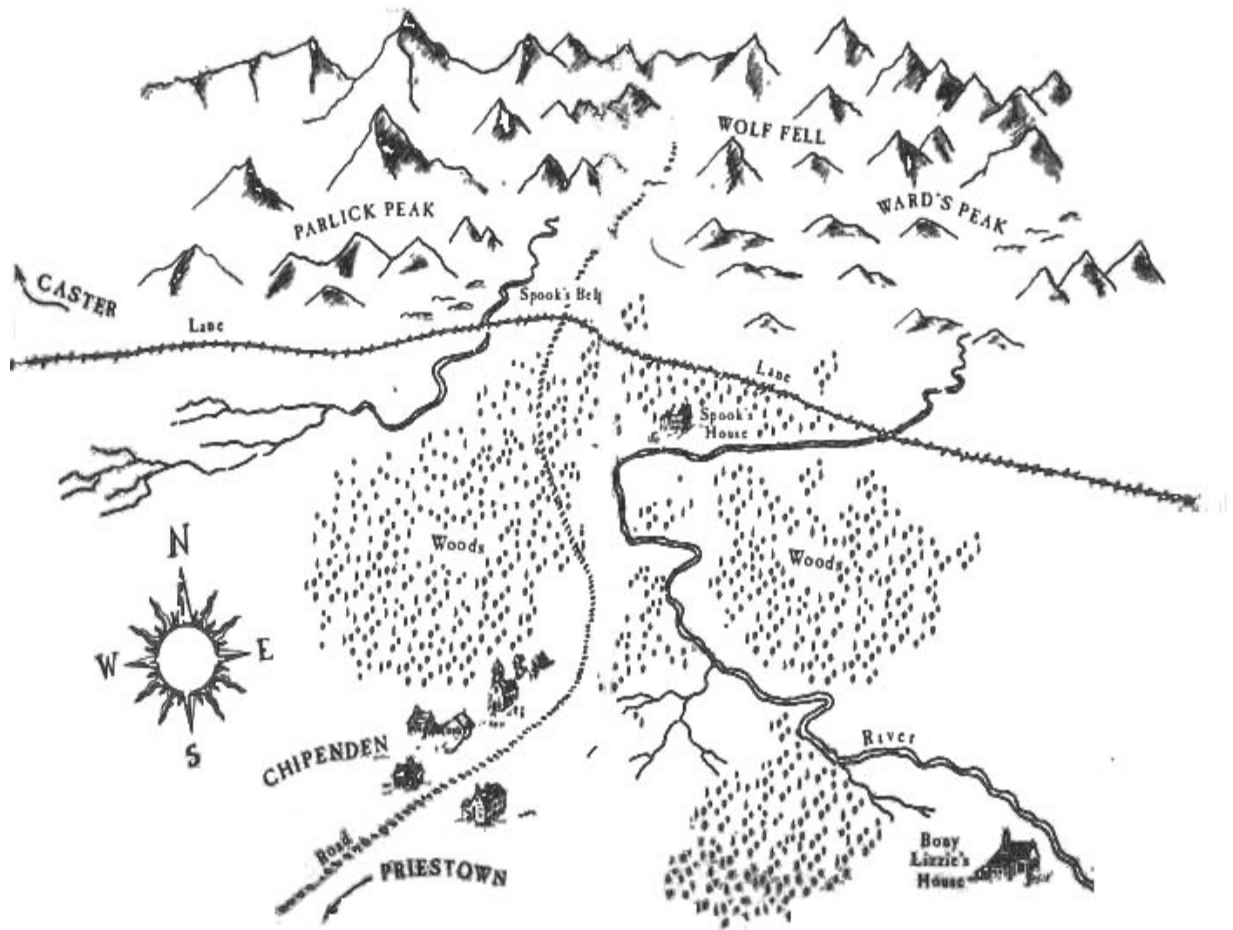
Alice

Tom can’t decide if Alice is good or evil. She terrifies the local village lads, is related to two of the most evil witch clans (the Malkins and the Deanes) and has been known to use dark magic. But she was trained as a witch against her I will and has helped Tom out of some tight spots. She seems to be a loyal friend, but can she be trusted?

Mam

Tom’s mam has always known he would become the Spook’s apprentice. She calls him her ‘gift to the County’. A loving mother and an expert on plants, medicine and

childbirth, Mam has always been a little different. Her origins in Greece remain a mystery. In fact, there are quite a few mysterious things about Mam ...



THE HIGHEST POINT IN THE COUNTY IS MARKED BY MYSTERY.
IT IS SAID THAT A MAN DIED THERE IN A GREAT STORM, WHILE BINDING
AN EVIL THAT THREATENED THE WHOLE WORLD.

THEN THE ICE CAME AGAIN, AND WHEN IT RETREATED, EVEN THE
SHAPES OF THE HILLS AND THE NAMES OF THE TOWNS IN THE VALLEYS
CHANGED.

NOW, AT THAT HIGHEST POINT ON THE FELLS, NO TRACE REMAINS OF
WHAT WAS DONE SO LONG AGO, BUT ITS NAME HAS ENDURED.

THEY CALL IT -

THE WARDSTONE.

CHAPTER 1 AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR



IT WAS A cold, dark November night and Alice and I were sitting by the kitchen fire with my master, the Spook. The weather had been getting steadily colder and I knew that any day now the Spook would decide it was time to set off for his 'winter house' on the bleak moor of Anglezarke.

I was in no rush to go. I'd only been the Spook's apprentice since the spring and had never seen the Anglezarke house, but my curiosity certainly wasn't getting the better of me. I was warm and comfortable here in Chipenden and that's where I'd rather have spent the winter.

I glanced up from the book of Latin verbs I was trying to learn and Alice caught my eye. She was sitting on a low stool close to the hearth, her face bathed in the warm glow of the fire. She smiled and I smiled back. Alice was the other reason I didn't want to leave Chipenden. She was the closest I'd ever had to a friend and she'd saved my life on a number of occasions over the last few months. I'd really enjoyed having her living here with us. She made the loneliness of a spook's life more bearable. But my master had told me in confidence that she would be leaving us soon. He'd never really trusted her because she came from a family of witches. He also thought she would start to distract me from my lessons, so when the Spook and I went

to Anglezarke, she wouldn't be coming with us. Poor Alice didn't know this and I hadn't the heart to tell her, so for now I was just enjoying another of our last precious evenings together in Chipenden.

But as it turned out, that was to be our last one of the year: as Alice and I sat reading by the glow of the fire and the Spook nodded off in his chair, the tolling of the summoning bell shattered our peace. At that unwelcome sound, my heart sank right down into my boots. It meant only one thing: spooks' business.

You see, nobody ever came up to the Spook's house. For one thing they'd have been ripped to pieces by the pet boggart that guarded the perimeter of the gardens. So, despite the failing light and the cold wind, it was my job to go down to the bell in the circle of willow trees to see who needed help.

I was feeling warm and comfortable after my early supper and the Spook must have sensed my reluctance to leave. He shook his head as if disappointed in me, his green eyes glittering fiercely.

'Get yourself down there, lad,' he growled. 'It's a bad night and whoever it is won't want to be kept waiting!'

As I stood up and reached for my cloak, Alice gave me a small sympathetic smile. She felt sorry for me, but I could also see that she was happy to sit there warming her hands while I had to go out into the bitter wind.

I closed the back door firmly behind me and, carrying a lantern in my left hand, strode through the western garden and down the hill, the wind trying its very best to tear the cloak from my back. At last I came to the withy trees, where two lanes crossed. It was dark and my lantern cast disturbing shadows, the trunks and branches twisting into limbs, claws and goblin faces. Above my head the bare branches were dancing and shaking, the wind whining and wailing like a banshee, a female spirit that warned of a death to come.

But these things didn't worry me much. I'd been to this spot before in the dark, and on my travels with the Spook I'd faced such things that would make your hair stand on end. So I wasn't going to be bothered by a few shadows; I expected to be met by someone far more nervous than I was. Probably some farmer's lad sent by his ghost-plagued dad and desperate for help; a lad who'd be scared just to come within half a mile of the Spook's house.

But it wasn't a lad waiting in the withy trees and I halted in amazement. There, beneath the bell rope, stood a tall figure dressed in a dark cloak and hood, a staff in his left hand. It was another spook!

The man didn't move so I walked towards him, halting just a couple of paces away. He was broad-shouldered and slightly taller than my master, but of his face I could see little as the hood kept his features in shadow. He spoke before I could introduce myself.

'No doubt he's warming himself by the fire while you're out in the cold,' the stranger said, the sarcasm heavy in his voice. 'Nothing changes!'

'Are you Mr Arkwright?' I asked. 'I'm Tom Ward, Mr Gregory's apprentice ...'

It was a reasonable enough guess. My master, John Gregory, was the only spook I'd ever met but I knew there were others, the nearest being Bill Arkwright, who plied his trade beyond Caster, covering the northern border regions of the County. So it was very likely that this man was him - although I couldn't guess why he'd come calling.

The stranger pulled the hood back from his face to reveal a black beard dappled with flecks of grey and an unruly thatch of black hair silvered at the temples. He smiled with his mouth but his eyes were cold and hard.

'Who I am is none of your business, boy. But your master knows me well enough!'

With those words he reached inside his cloak, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. I turned it over,

examining it quickly. It had been sealed with wax and was addressed *To John Gregory*.

'Well, get on your way, boy. Give him the letter and warn him that we'll be meeting again soon. I'll be waiting for him up on Anglezarke!'

I did as I was told, pushing the envelope into my breeches pocket, only too pleased to get away, for I didn't feel comfortable in this stranger's presence. But when I'd turned and taken a few paces, curiosity made me glance back. To my surprise, there was no sign of him at all. Although there hadn't been time for him to take more than a few steps himself, he'd already vanished into the trees.

Puzzled, I walked quickly, anxious to get back to the house and out of the cold, biting wind. I wondered what was in the letter. There'd been a threatening tone in the stranger's voice, and from what he'd said it didn't sound like the stranger and my master would have a friendly meeting!

With these thoughts whirling through my head, I passed the bench where the Spook gave me lessons when the weather was warm enough, and reached the first trees of the western garden. But then I heard something that made me catch my breath with fear.

An ear-splitting roar of anger bellowed out of the darkness beneath the trees. It was so fierce and terrifying that it halted me in my tracks. It was a throbbing growl that could be heard for miles and I'd heard it before. I knew it was the Spook's pet boggart about to defend the garden. But from what? Was I being followed?

I turned round and held up the lantern, peering anxiously into the darkness. Maybe the stranger was behind me! I could see nothing so I strained my ears, listening for the slightest sound. But all I could hear was the wind sighing through the trees and the distant barking of a farm dog. At last, satisfied that I wasn't being followed after all, I continued on my way.

I'd hardly taken another step when the roar of anger came again, this time much closer. The hair on the back of my neck began to rise and now I felt even more afraid as I sensed that the boggart's fury was being directed at me. But why should it be angry with me? I'd done nothing wrong.

I kept perfectly still, not daring to take another step, fearing that my slightest movement might cause it to attack. It was a cold night, but sweat was forming on my brow and I felt in real danger.

'It's only Tom!' I called out into the trees at last. 'There's nothing to fear. I'm just bringing a letter for my master ...'

There came an answering growl, this time much softer and further away, so after a few hesitant steps I walked on quickly. When I reached the house, the Spook was standing framed in the back door, staff in hand. He'd heard the boggart and come to investigate.

'You all right, lad?' he called.

'Yes,' I shouted back. 'The boggart was angry but I don't know why. It's calmed down now though.'

With a nod of his head the Spook went back into the house, leaning his staff behind the door.

By the time I'd followed him into the kitchen he was standing with his back to the fire, warming his legs. I pulled the envelope from my pocket.

'There was a stranger down there, dressed like a spook,' I told him, holding out the letter. 'He wouldn't tell me his name but asked me to give you this ...'

My master stepped forward and snatched the letter from my hand. Immediately the candle on the table began to flicker, the fire died low in the grate and a sudden coldness filled the kitchen, all signs that the boggart still wasn't best pleased. Alice looked alarmed and almost fell off her stool. But the Spook, with widening eyes, tore open the envelope and began to read.

When he'd finished, he frowned, his brow creased with annoyance. Muttering something under his breath, he threw the letter into the fire, where it burst into flames, curling up and blackening before falling into the back of the grate. I stared at him in astonishment. His face was filled with fury and he seemed to tremble from head to foot.

'We'll be setting off for my house at Anglezarke early tomorrow morning, before the weather takes a turn for the worse,' he snapped, glaring directly at Alice, 'but you'll only be coming part of the way, girl. I'll be leaving you near Adlington.'

'Adlington?' I said. 'That's where your brother Andrew lives now, isn't it?'

'Aye, lad, it is, but she'll not be staying there. There's a farmer and his wife on the outskirts of the village who I reckon owe me a few favours. They had many sons, but sadly only one lived. Then, to add to that tragedy, there was a daughter who was drowned. The lad mostly works away now - the mother's health is beginning to fail and she could do with some help. So that will be your new home.'

Alice looked at the Spook, her eyes widening in astonishment. 'My new home? That ain't fair!' she exclaimed. 'Why can't I stay with you? Ain't I done everything you asked?'

Alice hadn't put a foot wrong since the autumn, when the Spook had allowed her to live with us at Chipenden. She'd earned her keep by making copies of some of the books from the Spook's library, and she'd told me lots of the things that her aunt, the witch Bony Lizzie, had taught her so that I could write them down and increase my knowledge of witch lore.

'Aye, girl, you've done what I asked, so I've no complaints there,' the Spook said. 'But that's not the problem. Training to be a spook is a hard business: the last thing Tom needs is to be distracted by a girl like you.'

There's no place for a woman in a spook's life. In fact it's the only real thing we have in common with priests.'

'But where's this come from all of a sudden? I've helped Tom, not distracted him!' Alice protested. 'And I couldn't have worked harder. Has someone written to tell you otherwise?' she demanded angrily, gesturing towards the back of the grate, where the burned letter had fallen.

'What?' asked the Spook, raising his eyebrows in puzzlement, but then quickly realizing what she meant. 'No, of course not. But what's in private correspondence is none of your business. Anyway, I've made up my mind,' he said, fixing her with a hard stare. 'So we won't debate it any further. You'll get a fresh start. It's as good a chance as any to find your proper place in this world, girl. And it'll be your last chance too!'

Without a word or even a glance at me, Alice turned away and stamped up the stairs to bed. I stood up to follow her and offer some words of comfort but the Spook called me back.

'You wait here, lad! We need to talk before you go up those stairs, so sit yourself down!'

I did as I was told and sat back down by the fire.

'Nothing you say is going to change my mind! Accept that now and things will be a lot easier,' the Spook told me.

'That's as may be,' I said, 'but there were better ways of telling her. Surely you could have broken it to her a bit more gently?'

'I've got more things to worry about than the girl's feelings,' said the Spook.

There was no arguing with him when he was like this so I didn't waste my breath. I wasn't happy, but there was nothing I could do about it. I knew my master had made up his mind to do this weeks ago and wasn't about to change it now. Personally I didn't understand why we had to go to Anglezarke anyway. And why were we going now, so suddenly? Was it something to do with the stranger and

what he'd written in the letter? The boggart had reacted oddly too. Was it because it knew that I was carrying that letter?

'The stranger said he'd be seeing you up on Anglezarke,' I blurted out. 'He didn't seem too friendly. Who was he?'

The Spook glared at me, and for a moment I thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he shook his head again and muttered something under his breath before speaking.

'His name is Morgan and he was once an apprentice of mine. A failed apprentice, I might add, even though he studied under me for almost three years. As you know, not all my apprentices make the grade. He just wasn't up to the job so he holds a grudge, that's all. Happen you'll see nothing of him when we're up there, but if you do, keep well clear. He's nothing but trouble, lad. Now, get yourself upstairs: as I said, we've an early start tomorrow.'

'Why do we need to go to Anglezarke for the winter?' I asked. 'Couldn't we just stay here? Wouldn't it be more comfortable in *this* house?' It was something that just didn't make any sense.

'You've asked enough questions for one day!' the Spook said, his voice filled with irritation. 'But I will say this. We don't always do things because we want to do them. And if it's comfort you want, then this isn't the trade for you. Like it or lump it, folk need us up there - especially when the nights draw in. We're needed so that's why we go. Now off to bed. Not another word!'

It wasn't the full answer that I'd hoped for, but the Spook had a good reason for everything he did and I was just the apprentice with a lot to learn. So, with an obedient nod, I went off to bed.

CHAPTER 2 FAREWELL TO CHIPENDEN



ALICE WAS SITTING on the stairs outside my room waiting for me. A candle beside her flickered shadows onto the door.

‘Don’t want to leave here, Tom,’ she said, coming to her feet. ‘Been happy here, I have. His winter house would be the next best thing. Old Gregory ain’t being right with me!’

‘I’m sorry, Alice, I agree, but he’s made up his mind. There’s nothing I can do.’

I could see that she’d been crying but I didn’t know what else to say. Suddenly she seized my left hand and squeezed it hard. ‘Why does he always have to be like that?’ she asked. ‘Why does he hate women and girls so much?’

‘I think he’s been hurt in the past,’ I said gently. I’d recently learned some things about my master but so far I’d kept them to myself. ‘Look, I’m going to tell you something now, Alice, but you have to promise not to tell anybody else and never let the Spook know I told you!’

‘I promise,’ she whispered, her eyes very wide.

‘Well, do you remember when he almost put you in the pit when we came back from Priesttown?’

Alice nodded. My master dealt with malevolent witches by keeping them trapped alive in pits. He’d been about to put Alice in one a while ago, even though she hadn’t really deserved it.

‘Do you remember what I shouted?’ I asked.

'I couldn't hear properly, Tom. I was struggling and terrified, but whatever you said did the trick because he changed his mind. I'll always be grateful to you for that.'

'I just reminded him that he hadn't put Meg in the pit, so he shouldn't do it to you!'

'Meg?' Alice interrupted. 'Who's she? Never heard her mentioned before ...'

'Meg's a witch. I read all about her in one of the Spook's diaries. As a young man he fell in love with her. I think she broke his heart. And what's more she's still living somewhere up on Anglezarke.'

'Meg who?'

'Meg Skelton—'

'No! That can't be right. Came from foreign parts, Meg Skelton did. Went back home years ago. Everybody knows that. She was a lamia witch and wanted to be with her own kind again.'

I knew a lot about lamia witches from a book in the Spook's library. Most of them came from Greece, where my mam once lived, and in their wild state they fed upon the blood of humans.

'Well, Alice, you're right about her not being born in the County, but the Spook says she's still here and I'll get to meet her this winter. For all I know she could be living in his house—'

'Don't be daft, Tom. That ain't likely, is it? What woman in her right mind would live with him?'

'He's not that bad, Alice,' I reminded her. 'We've both been sharing a house with him for weeks and we've been happy enough!'

'If Meg is living in his house up there,' Alice said, a wicked smile on her face, 'don't be surprised if he has her buried in a pit.'

I smiled in return. 'Well, we'll find out when we get there,' I said.

'No, Tom. *You'll* find out. I'll be living somewhere else. Remember? But it's not all bad because Adlington's close to Anglezarke,' she said. 'Ain't much of a walk so you could visit me, Tom. Would you? Would you do that? That way I wouldn't be so lonely ...'

Although I wasn't sure that the Spook would let me visit, I wanted to make her feel better. Suddenly I remembered Andrew.

'What about Andrew?' I said. 'He's the only brother the Spook has left and he's living and working in Adlington now. My master's bound to want to see him from time to time, what with living so close. And he'll probably take me with him. We'll be popping into the village all the time, I'm sure, so there'll be lots of chances for me to see you.'

Alice smiled then and let go of my hand. 'Then make sure you do, Tom. I'll be expecting you. Don't let me down. And thank you for telling me all that stuff about Old Gregory. In love with a witch, eh? Who'd have thought he had it in him?'

With that, she snatched up her candle and went up the stairs. I really was going to miss Alice, but finding an excuse to see her might be harder than I'd suggested. The Spook certainly wouldn't approve. He didn't have much time for girls and had warned me on many occasions to beware of them. I'd told Alice enough for now about my master, too much perhaps, but there was more to the Spook's past than just Meg. He'd also got himself involved with another woman, Emily Burns, who had already been betrothed to another of his brothers. The brother was dead now but the scandal had divided his family, causing a deal of trouble. Emily was also supposed to be living somewhere near Anglezarke. There are two sides to every story and I wasn't about to judge the Spook until I knew more; still, it was twice as many women as most County men ever have in their lifetimes: the Spook had certainly lived a bit!

I went into my room and put my candle on the table beside the bed. Written on the wall close to its foot were lots of names, scrawled there by former apprentices. Some had completed their training with the Spook successfully: Bill Arkwright's name was there in the top left-hand corner. A lot had failed and hadn't completed their time. Some had even died. Billy Bradley's name was there in the other corner. He'd been the apprentice before me but he'd made a mistake and had his fingers bitten off by a boggart. Billy had died of shock and loss of blood.

I searched the wall carefully that night. As far as I knew, anyone who'd ever stayed in this room had written their name there, including me. My own name was very small because there wasn't much space left, but it was there all the same. Yet as far as I could see there was one name missing. I searched the wall carefully just to be sure, but I was right: there was no 'Morgan' written on the wall. So why was that? The Spook said he'd been his apprentice so why hadn't he added his name?

What was so different about Morgan?

The following morning, after a quick breakfast, we packed and got ready to go. Just before we left, I sneaked back into the kitchen to say goodbye to the Spook's pet boggart.

'Thanks for all the meals you've cooked,' I said aloud to the empty air.

I wasn't sure if the Spook would have been too happy about me making a special trip to the kitchen to say thanks: he was always going on about not getting too close to 'the hired help'.

Anyway, I know the boggart appreciated the praise because no sooner had I spoken than a deep purring began under the kitchen table and it was so loud that the pots and pans began to rattle. The boggart was mostly invisible, but occasionally it took the shape of a big ginger tom cat.

I hesitated, gathered my courage and spoke again. I wasn't sure how the boggart would react to what I had to say.

'I'm sorry if I made you angry last night,' I said. 'I was just doing my job. Was it the letter that upset you?'

The boggart wasn't able to speak so I wasn't going to get a reply in words. Instinct had made me ask the question. A feeling that it was the right thing to do.

Suddenly there was a whoosh of air down the chimney, a faint smell of soot, then a fragment of paper flew up from the grate and landed on the hearth rug. I stepped forward and picked it up. It was burned around the edges and part of it crumbled away in my fingers, but I knew that it was all that remained of the letter I'd delivered for Morgan.

There were just a few words on that scorched scrap of paper and I stared at them for a while before I could make them out:

*Give me what belongs to me or I'll make you sorry
you were ever born. You can start by*

That was all there was, but it was enough to tell me that Morgan was threatening my master. What was it all about? Had the Spook taken something from Morgan? Something that rightfully belonged to him? I couldn't imagine the Spook stealing anything. He just wasn't like that. It didn't make any sense at all.

My thoughts were disturbed by the Spook shouting from the front door. 'Come on, lad! What are you up to? Don't dawdle! We haven't got all day!'

I screwed up the paper and threw it back into the grate, picked up my staff and ran to the door. Alice was already standing outside but the Spook was in the doorway, eyeing me suspiciously, two bags at his feet. We hadn't packed much but I still had to carry both of them.

By now the Spook had given me a bag of my own, although so far I hadn't got much to put inside it. All it contained was a silver chain given to me by my mam, a tinderbox, which was a leaving present from my dad, my notebooks and a few clothes. Some of my socks had been darned so much that they were almost new, but the Spook had bought me a winter sheepskin coat, which was very warm, and I was wearing it under my cloak. I had a staff of my own too - a new one my master had cut himself from rowan wood, which was very effective against most witches.

The Spook, for all his disapproval of Alice, had been generous regarding her clothing. She too had a new winter coat, a black woollen one that came down almost to her ankles; it had an attached hood to keep her ears warm.

The cold didn't seem to bother the Spook much and he wore his cloak and hood just as he had in spring and summer. His health had been poor in the last few months, but now he seemed to have recovered and appeared as strong as ever.

The Spook locked the front door behind us, squinted up into the winter sun and set off at a furious pace. I picked up both bags and followed as best I could, with Alice close at my heels.

'Oh, by the way, lad,' the Spook called back over his shoulder, 'we'll be calling in at your dad's farm on our way south. He still owes me ten guineas as the final payment for your training!'

I'd been sad to leave Chipenden. I'd grown fond of the house and gardens and I was sorry to think that Alice and I would be apart from now on. But at least I'd have a chance to see my mam and dad. So my heart leaped with happiness and there was a new energy in my step. I was on my way home!

CHAPTER 3 HOME



AS WE TRAVELLED south, I kept glancing back at the fells. I'd spent so much time walking up there close to the clouds that some fells were like old friends, particularly Parlick Pike, which was the nearest one to the Spook's summer house. But by the end of the second day of walking, those big familiar hills were no more than a low, purple line on the horizon and I was very glad of my new coat. We'd already spent an uncomfortable night freezing in a roofless barn, and although the wind had dropped and the sun was shining weakly, it now seemed to be getting colder by the hour.

At last we approached home, and my eagerness to see my family again grew with every stride. I was desperate to see my dad. On my last visit he'd just been getting over a serious illness, with little chance that he'd ever fully recover his health. He'd intended to retire and hand the farm over to my eldest brother, Jack, at the beginning of the winter anyway. But his illness had brought things forward. The Spook had called it my dad's farm, but that wasn't really true any more.

Suddenly, below us, I could see the barn and the familiar farmhouse with a plume of smoke rising from the chimney. The patchwork of surrounding fields and the bare trees

looked bleak and wintry and I longed to warm my hands by the kitchen fire.

My master stopped at the end of the lane. 'Well, lad, I don't think your brother and his wife will be too pleased to see us. Spooks' business upsets most people, so we shouldn't hold it against them. Off you go and fetch my money; the girl and I will wait here. No doubt you'll be looking forward to seeing your family again, but don't be longer than an hour. While you're sitting by a warm fire, we'll be freezing our socks off here!'

He was right: my brother Jack and his wife didn't like spooks' business and had warned me in the past not to bring it to their door. So I left Alice and the Spook and ran up the lane towards the farm. When I opened the gate, the dogs began to bark and Jack came round the side of the barn. We hadn't got on too well together since I'd become the Spook's apprentice, but for once he looked happy to see me and his face split into a broad grin.

'Good to see you, Tom,' he said, putting his arm across my shoulders.

'And you too, Jack. But how's Dad?' I asked.

The smile slipped from my brother's face as quickly as it had come. 'The truth is, Tom, I don't think he's that much better than last time you were here. Some days are an improvement on others, but first thing in the morning he coughs and splutters so much he can hardly get his breath. It's painful to listen to. We want to help him but there's nothing we can do.'

I shook my head sadly. 'Poor Dad. I'm on my way down south for the winter,' I told him, 'and I've just called in for the rest of the money Dad owes the Spook. I wish I could stay but I can't. My master's waiting at the end of the lane. We're to set off again in an hour.'

I didn't mention Alice. Jack knew she was the niece of a witch and had little time for her. They'd crossed swords

before and I didn't want a repeat performance.

My brother turned and gazed back towards the lane before looking me up and down. 'You certainly dress the part anyway,' he said with a grin.

He was right. I'd left the bags with Alice, but wearing my black cloak and carrying my staff, I looked like a smaller version of my master.

'Like the jacket?' I asked, pulling back my cloak to let him see it properly.

'Looks warm.'

'Mr Gregory bought it for me. Says I'll need it. He has a house up on Anglezarke Moor, not far from Adlington. That's where we're spending the winter and it's bitterly cold over there.'

'Aye, it'll be cold up there all right - you can be sure of that! Rather you than me. Anyway, I'd best get back to my chores,' Jack said. 'Don't keep Mam waiting. She's been really bright and cheerful today. Must have known you were coming.'

With that, Jack set off back across the yard, pausing to wave from the corner of the barn. I waved back and then walked towards the kitchen door. Most likely Mam had known I was on my way. She has a way of sensing things like that. As a midwife and healer she often knows when someone is coming to seek her help.

As I pushed open the back door, I found Mam sitting in her rocking chair by the fire. The curtains were closed because she is sensitive to sunlight. She smiled as I walked into the kitchen.

'Good to see you, son,' she said. 'Come here and give me a hug and then you can tell me all your news!'

I went across and she held me close. Then I drew up a chair next to her. A lot had happened since I'd last seen Mam in the autumn, but I'd sent her a long letter telling her all about the dangers I'd faced with my master during the final stages of a job in Prieststown.