

THE SPOOKS BATTLE



*Can they stop
what's coming?*

JOSEPH DELANEY

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

How to Read Spook's Symbols

Character Profiles

Map

Epigraph

Chapter 1: A Visitor from Pendle

Chapter 2: Theft and Kidnapping

Chapter 3: Priorities

Chapter 4: East to Pendle

Chapter 5: The Three Sisters

Chapter 6: The Cellar of Mirrors

Chapter 7: Alice's Tale

Chapter 8: Mistress Wurmalde

Chapter 9: Footprints

Chapter 10: Tibb

Chapter 11: Thief and Murderer

Chapter 12: The Army Arrives

Chapter 13: The Sepulchre

Chapter 14: The Wight

Chapter 15: Like Lithe Cats

Chapter 16: Mam's Trunks

Chapter 17: Moonlight

Chapter 18: James the Blacksmith

Chapter 19: Agnes Sowerbutts

Chapter 20: The End of An Enemy

Chapter 21: Back to Downham

Chapter 22: The Battle of Pendle Hill

Chapter 23: Blood Moon

Chapter 24: Despair

Chapter 25: A New Order

About the Author

The Wardstone Chronicles

Also by Joseph Delaney

Thomas J. Ward's Journal

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About the Book

WARNING: NOT TO BE READ AFTER DARK

'I see your future clearly. Your master will be dead, and you will be alone.'

The Spook and his apprentice protect the County from the dark but now a terrible danger threatens.

The witches are rising and the three most powerful clans are uniting to conjure an unimaginable - the Devil himself.

If they succeed, will Tom and his master have the courage and cunning to defeat the most powerful enemy of all ... ?

The fourth chilling tale in the Wardstone Chronicles

THE SPOOKS BATTLE



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

I - dangerous

X - hardly detectable

B

Naturally
bound boggart

B

Artificially
bound boggart

Ghosts/Ghasts

γ

X

Gregory

I - dangerous

X - hardly detectable

Witches

O

M

Gregory

M - malevolent

B - benign

U - unaware

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.

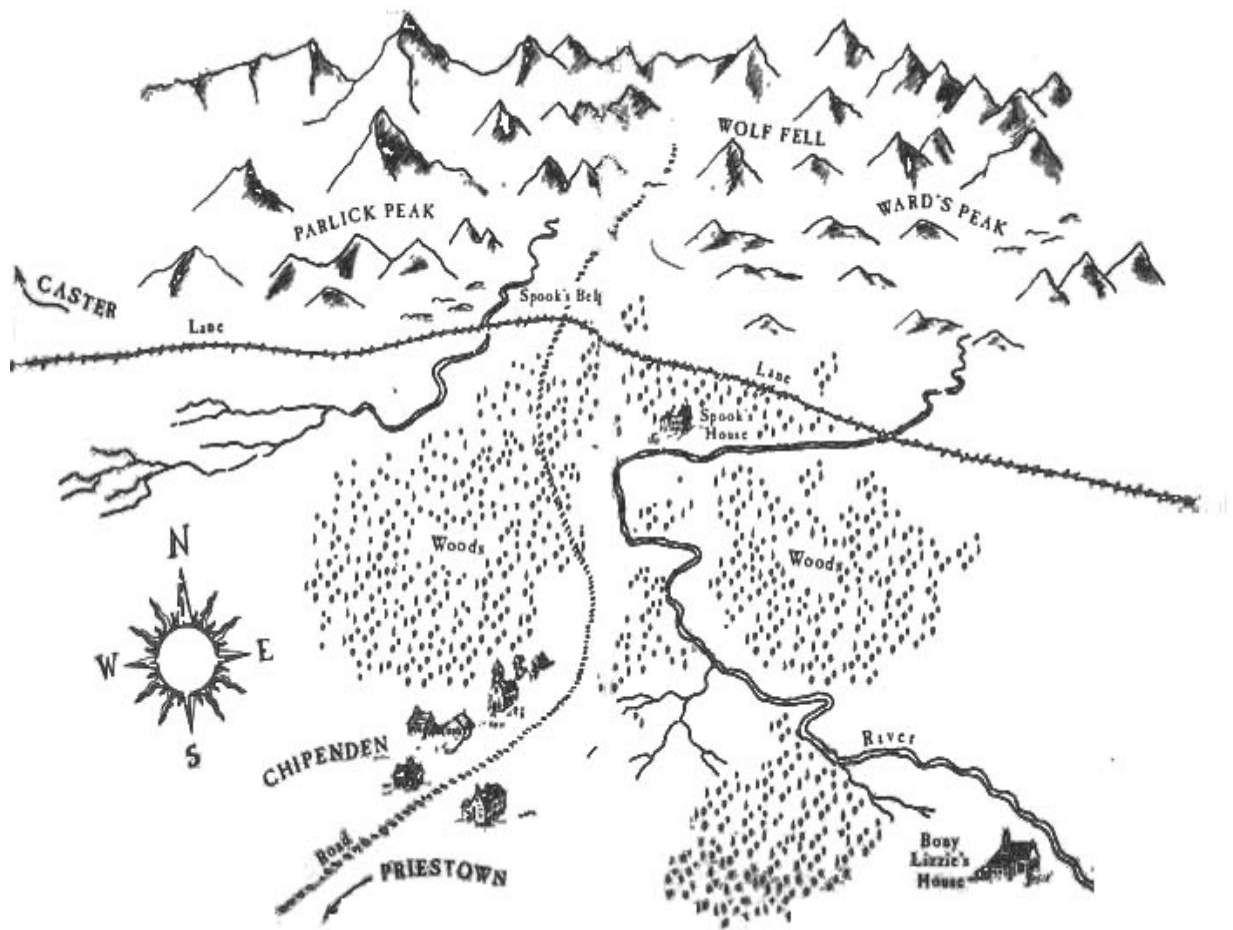
For over sixty years he has protected the County from things that go bump in the night.

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 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 FELS, NO TRACE REMAINS OF
WHAT WAS DONE SO LONG AGO, BUT ITS NAME HAS ENDURED.

THEY CALL IT-

THE WARDSTONE.

CHAPTER 1 A VISITOR FROM PENDLE



THE WITCH WAS chasing me through the dark wood, getting nearer and nearer by the second.

I ran fast, frantic to escape, weaving desperately, with branches whipping into my face and brambles clutching at my weary legs. The breath rasped harshly in my throat as I drove myself harder and harder towards the edge of the wood. Beyond that lay the slope leading up to the Spook's western garden. If only I could reach that refuge, I'd be safe!

I wasn't defenceless. In my right hand I gripped my rowan staff, which was particularly effective against witches; in my left was my silver chain, coiled about my wrist, ready for throwing. But would I get even half a chance to use either? For the chain I needed a gap between us, but already the witch was close at my heels.

Suddenly the footsteps behind me ceased. Had she given up? I ran on, the waning moon now visible through the leaf canopy above, silver-dappling the ground at my feet. The trees were thinning. I'd almost reached the edge of the wood.

Then, just as I passed the last tree, she appeared from nowhere and ran at me from the left, her teeth gleaming in

the moonlight, her arms outstretched as if ready to claw out my eyes. Still running, veering away, I flicked my left wrist and cracked the chain to send it hurtling towards her. For a moment I thought I had her, but she swerved suddenly and the chain fell harmlessly onto the grass. The next moment she thudded into me, knocking the staff from my hand.

I hit the ground so hard that all the breath was driven from my body, and in an instant she was on me, her weight bearing down on me. I struggled for a moment, but I was winded and exhausted and she was very strong. She sat on my chest and pinned my arms down on either side of my head. Then she leaned forward so that our faces were almost touching, and her hair was like a black shroud touching my cheeks and blotting out the stars. Her breath was on my face but it wasn't rank like that of a blood- or bone-witch. It was sweet like spring flowers.

'Got you now, Tom, I have!' Alice exclaimed triumphantly. 'Ain't good enough, that. You'll need to do better in Pendle!'

With that, she gave a laugh and rolled off me, and I sat up, still fighting for breath. After a few moments I found the strength to walk across and collect my staff and silver chain. Although she was the niece of a witch, Alice was my friend and had saved me more than once during the past year. Tonight I'd been practising my survival skills, Alice playing the part of a witch seeking my life. I should have been grateful but I felt annoyed. It was the third night in a row that she'd got the better of me.

As I started to walk up the slope towards the Spook's western garden, Alice ran to my side and matched me step for step.

'No need to sulk, Tom!' she said softly. 'It's a nice mild summer's night. Let's make the best of it while we can. Be on our travels soon, we will, and we'll both be wishing we were back here.'

Alice was right. I'd be fourteen at the beginning of August and I'd been the Spook's apprentice for over a year now. Although we'd faced many serious dangers together, something even worse was looming. For some time the Spook had been hearing reports that the threat from the Pendle witches was growing; he'd told me that we'd soon be travelling there to try and deal with it. But there were dozens of witches and maybe hundreds of their supporters, and I couldn't see how we could triumph against such odds. After all, there were only three of us: the Spook, Alice and me.

'I'm not sulking,' I said.

'Yes you are. Your chin's almost touching the grass.'

We walked on in silence until we entered the garden and saw the Spook's house through the trees.

'Ain't said anything yet about when we're off to Pendle, has he?' Alice asked.

'Not a thing.'

'Haven't you asked? Don't find nothing out without asking!'

'Course I've asked him,' I told Alice. 'He just taps the side of his nose and tells me that I'll find out in good time. My guess is that he's waiting for something but I don't know what.'

'Well, I just wish he'd get on with it. The waiting's making me nervous.'

'Really?' I said. 'I'm in no rush to leave and I didn't think you'd want to go back there.'

'I don't. It's a bad place, Pendle, and it's a big place too – a whole district with villages and hamlets and big, ugly Pendle Hill right at its centre. I've got a lot of evil family there I'd sooner forget about. But if we've got to go, I'd like to get it over and done with. I can hardly sleep at night now worrying about it.'

When we entered the kitchen, the Spook was sitting at the table writing in his notebook, a candle flickering at his

side. He glanced up but didn't say anything because he was too busy concentrating. We sat ourselves down on two stools, which we drew close to the hearth. As it was summer, the fire was small, but it still sent a comforting warm glow up into our faces.

At last my master snapped his notebook shut and looked up. 'Who won tonight?' he asked.

'Alice,' I said, hanging my head.

'That's three nights in a row the girl's got the better of you, lad. You're going to have to do better than that. A lot better. First thing in the morning, before breakfast, I'll see you in the western garden. It's extra practice for you.'

I groaned inside. In the garden was a wooden post which was used as a target. If the practice didn't go well, my master would keep me at it for a long time and breakfast would be delayed.

I set off for the garden just after dawn but the Spook was already there waiting for me.

'Well, lad, what kept you?' he chided. 'Doesn't take that long to rub the sleep out of your eyes!'

I still felt tired but I tried my best to smile and look bright and alert. Then, with my silver chain coiled over my left hand, I took careful aim at the post.

Soon I was feeling a lot better. For the one hundredth time since starting, I flicked my wrist and the chain cracked sharply as it unfurled, soaring through the air and glittering brightly in the morning sunshine to fall in a perfect widdershins spiral about the practice post.

Until a week earlier, the best I'd been able to achieve from eight feet was an average of nine successful throws out of ten attempts. But now, suddenly, the long months of practice had finally paid off. When the chain was coiled about the post for the hundredth time that morning, I hadn't missed even once!

I tried not to smile, I really did, but the sides of my mouth began to twitch upwards, and within moments a wide grin split my face. I saw the Spook shaking his head, but try as I might, I couldn't get the grin under control.

'Don't get above yourself, lad!' he warned, striding towards me through the grass. 'I hope you're not getting complacent. Pride comes before a fall, as many have found to their cost. And as I've often told you before, a witch won't stand still while you make your throw! From what the girl told me about last night, you've a long way to go yet. Right, let's try some throws on the run!'

For the next hour I was made to cast at the post while on the move. Sometimes sprinting, sometimes jogging, running towards it, away from it, casting forwards, obliquely or back over my shoulder, I did it all, working hard but growing hungrier by the minute. I missed the post lots of times but I also had a few spectacular successes. The Spook was finally satisfied and we moved on to something he'd only introduced me to a few weeks earlier.

He handed me his staff and led me to the dead tree we used for target practice. I pressed the lever to release the hidden blade in the staff and then spent the next fifteen minutes or so treating the rotten trunk as if it were an enemy threatening my life. Time and time again I drove the blade into it until my arms grew heavy and tired. The most recent trick my master had taught me was to hold the staff casually in my right hand before quickly transferring it to my stronger left and stabbing it hard into the tree. There was a knack to it. You sort of flicked it from one hand to the other.

When I showed signs of weariness, the Spook clicked his tongue. 'Come on, lad, let's see you do it again. One day it might just save your life!'

This time I did it almost perfectly: the Spook nodded and led us back through the trees for a hard-earned breakfast.

Ten minutes later Alice had joined us and the three of us were seated at the large oak table in the kitchen, tucking into a big breakfast of ham and eggs cooked by the Spook's pet boggart. The boggart had lots of jobs to do around the house in Chipenden: cooking, making the fires and washing the pots as well as guarding the house and gardens. It wasn't a bad cook but it sometimes reacted to what was happening in the house, and if it was feeling angry or moody, then you could expect an unappetizing meal. Well, the boggart was certainly in a good mood that morning because I remember thinking it was one of the best breakfasts it had ever cooked.

We ate in silence, but as I was mopping up the last bit of yellow yolk with a large slice of buttered bread, the Spook pushed back his chair and stood up. He paced backwards and forwards across the flags in front of the hearth, then came to a halt facing the table and stared straight at me.

'I'm expecting a visitor later today, lad,' he said. 'We've a lot to discuss, so once he's arrived and you've met him, I'd like time to talk to him in private. I think it's about time you went home, back to your brother's farm, to collect those trunks that your mam left you. I think it's best to bring them back here to Chipenden, where you can search through them thoroughly. We may well find things in there that'll prove useful on our trip to Pendle. We're going to need all the help we can get.'

My dad had died last winter and left the farm to Jack, my eldest brother. But after Dad's death we'd discovered something very unusual in his will.

Mam had a special room in our home farm. It was just under the attic and she always kept it locked. This room had been left to me, together with the trunks and boxes it contained, and the will stated that I could go there any time I wanted. This had upset my brother Jack and his wife Ellie. My job as an apprentice to the Spook worried them. They feared that I might bring something from the dark back to

the house. Not that I blamed them; that was exactly what had happened the previous spring, and all their lives had been in danger.

But it was Mam's wish that I inherit the room and its contents, and before she went away she'd made sure that both Ellie and Jack accepted the situation. She'd returned to her own land, Greece, to fight the rising power of the dark there. It made me sad to think that I might never see her again, and I suppose that's why I'd kept putting off going to look in the trunks. Although I was curious to find out what they contained, I couldn't face the thought of seeing the farmhouse again, empty of both Mam and Dad.

'Yes, I'll do that,' I told my master. 'But who's your visitor?'

'A friend of mine,' said the Spook. 'He's lived in Pendle for years and he'll be invaluable in helping with what we need to do there.'

I was astonished. My master kept his distance from people, and because he dealt with ghosts, ghaasts, boggarts and witches, they certainly kept their distance from him! I'd never imagined for a moment that he knew somebody whom he regarded as a 'friend'!

'Close your mouth, lad, or you'll start collecting flies!' he said. 'Oh, and you'll be taking young Alice with you. I'll have lots of things to discuss and I'd like both of you out from under my feet.'

'But Jack won't want a visit from Alice as well,' I protested.

It wasn't that I didn't want Alice to come with me. I'd be glad of her company on the journey. It was just that Jack and Alice didn't exactly get on. He knew that she was the niece of a witch and he didn't want her near his family.

'Use your initiative, lad. Once you've hired a horse and cart, she can wait outside the farm boundary while you load up the trunks. And I'll expect you back here as soon as

possible. Now, time's short – I can't spare more than half an hour for your lessons today so let's get started.'

I followed the Spook out to the western garden and was soon seated on the bench there, my notebook open and pen at the ready. It was a nice warm morning. The sheep bleated in the distance and the fells ahead were bathed in bright sunshine, dappled by small cloud shadows chasing each other towards the east.

The first year of my apprenticeship had largely been devoted to the study of boggarts; the topic for this year was witches.

'Right, lad,' said the Spook, starting to pace up and down as he spoke. 'As you know, a witch can't sniff us out because we're both seventh sons of seventh sons. But that only applies to what we call "long-sniffing". So write that down. It's your first heading. Long-sniffing is sniffing out the approach of danger in advance, just as Bony Lizzie sniffed out that mob from Chipenden that burned down her house. A witch can't sniff us out that way, so that gives us the element of surprise.

'But it's "short-sniffing" that we must beware of, so write that down too and underline it for emphasis. Up relatively close, a witch can find out a lot about us and knows in an instant our weaknesses and strengths. And the nearer you are to a witch, the more she finds out. So always keep your distance, lad. Never let a witch get nearer to you than the length of your rowan staff. Allowing her to come close holds other dangers too – be especially careful not to let a witch breathe into your face. Her breath can sap both your will and your strength. Grown men have been known to faint away on the spot!'

'I remember Bony Lizzie's foul breath,' I told him. 'It was more animal than human. More like that of a cat or a dog!'

'Aye, it was that, lad. Because, as we know, Lizzie used bone-magic and sometimes fed from human flesh or drank

human blood.'

Bony Lizzie, Alice's aunt, wasn't dead. She was imprisoned in a pit in the Spook's eastern garden. It was cruel but it had to be done. The Spook didn't hold with burning witches, so he kept the County safe by locking them in a pit.

'But not all witches have the foul breath of those who dabble in bone- and blood-magic,' my master continued. 'A witch who only uses familiar-magic might have breath that's as fragrant as May blossoms. So beware, for in that sweetness lies great danger. Such a witch has the power of "fascination" - write that word down too, lad. Just as a stoat can freeze a rabbit in its tracks while it moves closer, so some witches can dupe a man. They can make him complacent and happy, totally unaware of danger until it's far too late.

'And that's very closely allied to another power of some witches. We call it "glamour" - so get that word down as well. A witch can make herself appear to be something she's not. She can seem younger and more beautiful than she really is. Using that deceitful power, she can create an aura - projecting a false image - and we should always be on our guard. Because once glamour has attracted a man, it's the beginning of fascination and a gradual eroding of his free will. Using those tools, a witch can bind him to her will so that he believes her every lie and sees only what she wishes him to see.

'And glamour and fascination are a serious threat to us too. Being a seventh son of a seventh son won't help one bit. So beware! I suppose you still think I've been harsh where Alice is concerned. But I did it for the best, lad. I've always feared that, one day, she might use those powers to control you—'

'No,' I interrupted. 'That's not fair. I like Alice - not because she's bewitched me but because she's turned out all right and been a good friend to me. To both of us!

Before Mam left she told me she had faith in Alice and that's good enough for me.'

The Spook nodded and there was a sadness in his expression. 'Your mam may well be right. Time will tell, but just be on your guard - that's all I ask. Even a strong man can succumb to the wiles of a pretty girl with pointy shoes. As I know from experience. And now write up what I've just told you about witches.'

The Spook sat down on the bench beside me and was silent while I wrote it all down in my notebook. After I'd finished, I had a question for him.

'When we go to Pendle, are there any special dangers we face from the witch covens? Anything I've not heard about so far?'

The Spook stood up and began to pace backwards and forwards again, deep in thought. 'Pendle district is riddled with witches - there might well be things I've never come up against myself. We'll have to be flexible and ready to learn. But I think the biggest problem we face is their sheer numbers. Witches often bicker and argue, but when they do agree and meet together with a common purpose, their strength is greatly increased. Aye - we must beware that. You see, that's right at the heart of the threat we face - that the witch clans might unite.

'And here's something else for your notebook - you need to get the terminology correct. A "coven" is the term for thirteen witches gathering to combine their strength in some ceremony that evokes the powers of the dark. But the larger family of witches is commonly called a "clan". And a clan includes their menfolk and children, as well as family members who don't directly practise dark magic.'

The Spook waited patiently until I'd finished writing before continuing the lesson. 'Basically, as I've told you before, there are three main witch clans in Pendle - the Malkins, the Deanes and the Mouldheels - and the first is the worst of all. All of them row and bicker but the Malkins

and the Deanes have got closer over the years. They have intermarried – your friend Alice is the result of just such a union. Her mother was a Malkin and her father a Deane, but the good news there is that neither of them was a practising witch. On the other hand, both parents died young, and as you know, she was given into the care of Bony Lizzie. The training she received there is something she'll always struggle to overcome, and the danger in taking her back to Pendle is that she might revert to type and rejoin one of the clans.'

Again I was about to object but my master stopped me with a gesture. 'Let's just hope that doesn't happen,' he continued, 'but if she *isn't* bent back towards the dark, her local knowledge is going to be very important: she will be of invaluable help to us and our work.'

'Now, as for the third clan, the Mouldheels, they're much more mysterious. In addition to using blood- and bone-magic, they pride themselves on being skilled with mirrors. As I've told you before, I don't believe in prophecy, but it's said that the Mouldheels mainly use mirrors for scrying.'

'Scrying?' I asked. 'What's that?'

'Telling the future, lad. They say the mirrors show them what's going to happen. Now, the Mouldheels have mostly kept their distance from the other two clans, but recently I've heard that someone or something is keen for them to put aside that ancient enmity. And that's what we have to prevent. Because if the three clans unite and, more importantly, if they get three covens together, then who knows what evil they will launch upon the County? As you may remember, they did it once before, many years ago, and cursed me.'

'I remember you telling me,' I said. 'But I thought you didn't believe in their curse.'

'No, I like to think it was all nonsense but it still shook me up. Luckily the covens fell out soon after, before they

could inflict more damage on the County. But this time there's something a little more sinister about what's happening in Pendle and that's what I need my visitor to confirm. We need to prepare ourselves mentally and physically for what could be a terrible battle – and then we need to get to Pendle before it's too late.

'Well, lad,' the Spook finished, shielding his eyes and glancing towards the sun, 'this lesson's gone on long enough so it's back to the house with you. You can spend the rest of the morning studying.'

I passed the remainder of the morning alone in the Spook's library. He still didn't trust Alice fully and she wasn't allowed in the library in case she read something she wasn't supposed to. Now that there were three of us living in the house, my master had finally opened up another of the downstairs rooms and it was currently used as a study. Alice was working there now, earning her keep by copying one of the Spook's books. Some of them were rare and he was always afraid that something might happen to them so he liked to have a copy just in case.

I was studying covens – how a group of thirteen witches came together for their rituals. I was reading a passage that described what happened when witches held special feasts, which were called 'sabbaths'.

Some covens celebrate sabbaths weekly; others each month, at the time of either the full moon or the new moon. Additionally there are four great sabbaths held when the power of darkness is at its greatest: 'Candlemas', 'Walpurgis Night', 'Lammas' and 'Halloween'. At these four dark feasts, covens may combine in worship.

I already knew about Walpurgis Night. It took place on 30 April, and years earlier three covens had gathered

together at Pendle on that sabbath to curse the Spook. Well, we were now in the second week in July; I wondered when the next great sabbath was and began to search the page. I didn't get very far because at that moment something happened that I'd never experienced in the whole of my time in Chipenden.

Rap! Rap! Rap! Rap!

Someone was knocking on the back door! I couldn't believe it. Nobody came to the house. Visitors always went to the withy trees at the crossroads and rang the bell. To enter the gardens was to risk being torn to bits by the boggart that guarded the house and its perimeter. Who had knocked? Was it the 'friend' the Spook was expecting? And if so, how had he managed to reach the back door in one piece?

CHAPTER 2 THEFT AND KIDNAPPING



CURIOUS, I RETURNED my book to its place on the shelf and went downstairs. The Spook had already answered the door and was leading someone into the kitchen. When I saw him, my jaw dropped in surprise. He was a very big man, broad across the shoulders and at least two or three inches taller than the Spook. He had a friendly, honest face and looked to be in his late thirties, but the truly astonishing thing about him was that he was wearing a black cassock.

He was a priest!

'This is my apprentice, Tom Ward,' said the Spook with a smile.

'I'm very pleased to meet you, Tom,' said the priest, holding out his hand. 'I'm Father Stocks. My parish is Downham, north of Pendle Hill.'

'I'm pleased to meet you too,' I said, shaking his hand.

'John has told me all about you in his letters,' Father Stocks said. 'It seems you've got yourself off to a very promising start—'

At that moment Alice came into the kitchen. She looked our visitor up and down with surprise in her eyes when she saw that he was a priest. In turn, Father Stocks glanced

down at her pointy shoes and his eyebrows gave a slight twitch upwards.

‘And this is young Alice,’ said the Spook. ‘Alice, say hello to Father Stocks.’

Alice nodded and gave the priest a little smile.

‘I’ve heard a lot about you too, Alice,’ he said. ‘I believe you’ve family in Pendle—’

‘Blood ties, that’s all,’ replied Alice with a fierce frown. ‘My mam was a Malkin and my dad was a Deane. Ain’t my fault where I was born. None of us choose our kin.’

‘That’s very true,’ said the priest in a kindly voice. ‘I’m sure the world would be a very different place if we could. But it’s the way we live our lives that counts.’

Not much more was said after that. The priest was tired after his journey and it was clear that the Spook wanted us on our way to Jack’s farm, so we made our preparations to leave. I didn’t bother with my bag but just took my staff and a lump of cheese for us to eat on the journey.

The Spook walked us to the door. ‘Here’s what you’ll need to hire the cart,’ he said, handing me a small silver coin.

‘How did Father Stocks manage to get past the boggart and cross the garden safely?’ I asked as I put it into the pocket of my breeches.

The Spook smiled. ‘He’s crossed this garden many times before, lad, and the boggart knows him well. Father Stocks was once my apprentice. And a very successful one, I may add – he completed his time. But later he thought better of it and decided that the Church was his true vocation. He’s a useful man to know – he has two trades at his fingertips: the priesthood and ours. Add that to his background knowledge of Pendle and we couldn’t have a better ally.’

As we set off for my brother Jack’s farm, the sun was shining, the birds were singing; it was a perfect summer afternoon. I had Alice for company and I was going home.

Not only that: I was looking forward to seeing little Mary, Jack and his wife Ellie, who was expecting another baby. Mam had predicted that it would be the son that Jack had always wanted, someone to inherit the farm after he was dead. So I should have been happy. But as we drew closer to the farm, I couldn't shake off a feeling of sadness, which was slowly settling over me like a black cloud.

Dad was dead and there'd be no Mam to greet me. It was never going to feel like my real home again. That was the stark truth and I still hadn't fully come to terms with it.

'Penny for your thoughts,' Alice said with a smile.

I shrugged.

'Come on, cheer up, Tom. How many times do I have to tell you? We should make the best of it. Off to Pendle I reckon we'll be next week.'

'Sorry, Alice. I'm just thinking about Mam and Dad. Can't seem to get them out of my mind.'

Alice moved closer to my side and gave my hand an affectionate squeeze. 'It's hard, Tom, I know. But I'm sure you'll see your mam again one day. Anyway, aren't you looking forward to finding out what's in those trunks she's left you?'

'I'm curious, yes, I won't deny that ...'

'This is a nice spot,' said Alice, pointing to the side of the path. 'I'm feeling peckish. Let's eat.'

We sat down on a grassy bank under the shade of a massive oak tree and shared out the cheese we'd brought for the journey. We were both hungry so we ate it all. I wasn't on spook's business so there was no need to fast. We could live off the land.

It was as if Alice had read my thoughts. 'I'll catch us a couple of juicy rabbits at dusk,' she promised with a smile.

'That would be nice. You know, Alice,' I said, 'you've told me a lot about witches in general, but very little about Pendle and the witches who live *there*. Why's that? Reckon

I'll need to know as much as possible if we're heading there.'

Alice frowned. 'I've lots of painful memories of that place. Don't like to talk about my family. Don't like to talk about Pendle much - the thought of going back there scares me.'

'It's funny,' I said, 'but Mr Gregory's never talked much about Pendle either. You'd think we'd have been discussing and planning what it's like and what we're going to do when we get there.'

'Always likes to play things close to his chest, he does. He must have some sort of plan. I'm sure he'll share it with us when the time's right. Imagine Old Gregory having a friend!' said Alice, changing the subject. 'A friend who's a priest as well!'

'What I can't understand is why someone would give up being a spook to become a priest.'

Alice laughed at that. 'No stranger than Old Gregory being a priest and giving it up to become a spook!'

She was right - the Spook *had* been trained as a priest - and I laughed with her. But my opinion hadn't changed. As far as I could see, priests prayed and that was it. They didn't do anything directly to deal with the dark. They lacked the practical knowledge of our craft. It seemed to me that Father Stocks had taken a step in the wrong direction.

A little before dusk we stopped again and settled ourselves down in a hollow between two hills, close to the edge of a wood. The sky was clear, with the waning moon visible to the south-east. I busied myself making a fire while Alice went hunting for rabbits. Within an hour she was cooking them over the fire, the juice dribbling and hissing into the flames while my mouth watered.

I was still curious about Pendle, and despite Alice's reluctance to talk about her life there, I decided to try

again.

‘Come on, Alice,’ I said. ‘I know it’s painful for you to talk about, but I do need to know more about Pendle ...’

‘I suppose so,’ Alice said, peering at me over the flames. ‘Best that you’re prepared for the worst. Ain’t a nice place to be. And everybody’s scared. Whichever village you visit, you can see it in their faces. Can’t blame ‘em because the witches know almost everything that’s going on. After dark, most ordinary folk turn the mirrors in their houses to the wall.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘So they can’t be spied on. Nobody trusts a mirror at night. Witches, specially the Mouldheels, use them to spy on folks. They love to use ‘em for scrying and spying. In Pendle you never know who or what might suddenly peer out at you from a mirror. Remember old Mother Malkin? That should give you some idea of the sort of witch we’ll be facing ...’

The name Malkin sent a chill through my bones. Mother Malkin had been the most evil witch in the County and a year earlier, with Alice’s help, I’d managed to destroy her. But not before she’d threatened the lives of Jack and his family.

‘Even though she’s gone now, in Pendle there’s always someone else ready to step into the shoes of a dead witch,’ Alice said grimly. ‘And there are plenty of Malkins capable of that. Some of ‘em live in Malkin Tower, which ain’t a place to go anywhere near after dark. People who go missing in Pendle – that’s where they mostly end up. There are tunnels, pits and dungeons under the tower, full of the bones of those they’ve murdered.’

‘Why isn’t something done?’ I asked. ‘What about the High Sheriff at Caster? Can’t he do anything?’

‘Sent justices and constables to Pendle before, he has. Lots of times. Not that it did much good. Mostly they hanged the wrong people. Old Hannah Fairborne was one.

She was nearly eighty when they dragged her off to Caster in chains. Said she was a witch but that wasn't true. Still, she deserved to hang because she poisoned three of her nephews. Lots of that goes on in Pendle. It ain't a good place to be. And it ain't easy to sort things out there. That's why Old Gregory's left it so long.'

I nodded in agreement.

'I know more than most what it's like to live there,' Alice continued. 'There've been lots of unions between Malkins and Deanes, even though they're rivals. Truth is, the Malkins and Deanes hate the Mouldheels a lot more than they do each other. Life in Pendle is complicated. Lived there most of my life but still don't understand 'em.'

'Were you happy?' I asked. 'I mean, before you were looked after by Bony Lizzie ...?'

Alice grew silent and avoided my gaze and I realized that I shouldn't have asked. She'd never talked much about life with her parents or with Lizzie after they'd died.

'Don't remember life much before Lizzie,' she said at last. 'I mostly remember the rows. Me lying there in the darkness crying while my mam and dad fought like cat and dog. But sometimes they talked and laughed as well, so it wasn't all bad. That was the big difference afterwards. The silence. Lizzie didn't say much. More likely to give me a clout round the head than a kind word. Brooded a lot, she did. Gazed into the fire and muttered her spells. And if she weren't gawping into the flames, she'd be staring into a mirror. Sometimes I caught sight of things over her shoulder. Things that don't belong on this earth. Scared me, it did. Preferred Mam and Dad's fights to that.'

'Did you live in Malkin Tower?'

Alice shook her head. 'No. Only the Malkin coven and a few chosen helpers live in the tower itself. But I went there sometimes with my mam. Some of it's underground but I never went down there. They all live together in one big room and there was lots of arguing and screaming and