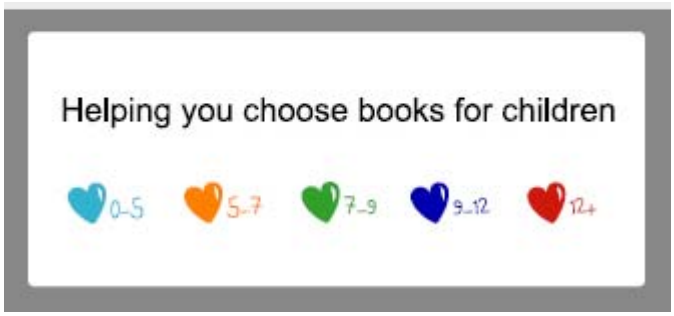
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Joseph Delaney

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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.