

Night Signals: Felicity Pulman

'I'm afraid this is the only room left, and it's rather small', Alan Halstead apologised, as he led us through a baronial hall filled with tapestries, suits of armour and ancient weapons to a room beyond.

We'd chosen the B&B, partly because of the name, but mostly because its description was intriguing: 'Situated on the edge of a medieval village, Halstead Hall has been occupied by members of the family since the 14th century. Now fully renovated, the house still carries an air of mystery linked to the apocryphal story of a resident ghost'.

'Don't tell us this is where the ghost hangs out!' Lisa joked.

Alan laughed. But I noticed his fingers were crossed as he said, 'We've certainly never witnessed a sighting here. But no-one believes the story, of course'.

'How disappointing! But do tell us all about it'. Lisa flopped down on the bed.

I shivered. I'd been feeling cold ever since I'd entered the room. To the depths of my soul, I knew I didn't want to stay here.

'The first Lord Halstead built the hall for his new bride'. Alan hesitated. 'Catherine was only sixteen; he was older and, by all accounts, a bully. The marriage wasn't happy, and he finally married someone else – after his first wife disappeared'.

'What happened to her?' Lisa asked eagerly.

'Apparently Lord Halstead locked her in this room, and she starved to death. The room was only unlocked after he died – but it was empty. Occasionally, over the years, family members reported hearing a tap-tapping noise. The legend says that once heard, a tragedy will follow. We know of one witness who later died in a duel; another drowned; a third was killed during the First World War'.

I turned to Lisa after he'd gone. 'I don't like it here', I said fiercely. 'Please let's find somewhere else to stay'.

'And miss out on a potential ghost sighting?' She laughed at me. 'It's all nonsense, Catherine Halstead, and you know it'.

Even after several glasses of red wine with dinner, I lay sleepless as I tried to dispel the image of a frantic young woman desperately trying to summon help.

Tap-tap.

'Did you hear that?' I sat bolt upright in bed.

'What? I didn't hear anything', Lisa said sleepily.

Tap-tap.

Louder now, more insistent.

Tap-tap.