

“It was murder. Murder most foul.”

At the whisper, Jade Nethercott glanced up from the book she had taken from a shelf. Her late father had written notes in the margins and underlined sections of text. Reading his comments, showing he had been outraged at the author’s opinions, made her feel close to him. In his book-room where chairs begged one to curl up, she had spent many hours with Father and her two sisters.

That had ended when her father had died from a weak heart none of them suspected he had. Neither she nor her sisters had been prepared for the loss, and a year’s passage had not eased their grief.

But Father’s had been a natural death, not murder. Who was talking about a heinous crime?

“It was murder. Murder most foul,” came the whisper again.

She looked around. “Who said that?”

Instead of an answer, she heard something click in the corridor beyond the book-room door. As if someone had abruptly unlatched a door.

If this was her sisters’ idea of a hoax to relieve the boredom of a stormy day, it was not an amusing one. She looked out and saw nobody. Maybe it was only the wind playing with ancient eaves where gargoyles spit out the rain coursing down onto the roofs.

She turned a page and continued to read.

“It was murder. Murder most foul.” The whisper was followed by the same rattling noise.

“Bother,” she muttered. Who was whispering such nonsense? Mrs. Mathers had been the housekeeper at Nethercott Castle for as long as Jade could remember. Anyone making such a to-do would be turned off by the housekeeper posthaste.

Setting the book on a table, Jade went to the door. She looked in both directions along the narrow hall at the top of the stairs. Two lamps were lit against the twilight. Light reflected in narrow pools off the wood floor covered by a red and green runner. On the paneled walls, the few paintings were in shadow.

Everything looked as it should, and she heard no more clatter. She sighed. Before Father’s death, the house had been filled with happy voices and laughter. No longer. It was as if after their mourning, they did not know how to be happy again.

She reached up to straighten her father’s portrait. In the painting, he looked not much older than she was now. He held a book in one hand and a quill in the other. His gaze was focused at something in the distance, and there was a hint of smile on his lips. That smile seemed to widen as light spread across the portrait.

What light? There should not be any light coming from the far end of the hall.

But there was. Not from a lamp, for the light shone about halfway between the floor and the high ceiling. It was a ball, then it stretched toward the floor.

“It was murder. Murder most foul.” The voice seemed to be coming from the light. It was, she noticed for the first time, a deep masculine voice.

She blinked once, then again, as the congealing light grew stronger. What was it? It could not be anything of this world. Her gaze flicked toward her father’s book-room and the book she had been holding. A book about restless spirits who walked the earth after death.

No, it was impossible. Her father had spent his life trying to prove the old castle was haunted, but nothing he had done – seances or attempts to contact the dead directly or special candles or anything else – had turned up any phantoms clinging to the chilly spots in the seldom used corridors and chambers. Cold spots in the rooms where the family gathered always could be explained by a drafty window or a piece of furniture blocking heat from a hearth.

Father had been disappointed, but eventually conceded that Nethercott Castle, in spite of its location on the desolate Yorkshire moors and its generations of inhabitants – first as a priory and then as a castle – was unhaunted.

So what was an otherworldly light doing lurking in the corridor? Fate was so cruel. She bit back an unseemly oath, then chided herself. But why was she worried about swearing in the presence of someone who had been cursed during his life? For what other reason would that person still be loitering in the castle?

“It was murder. Murder most foul. It was – ” The bass voice in the light halted, then said, “I guess I should be grateful, Miss Nethercott, that you are not screaming or surrendering to a fit of vapors.”

A ghost that spoke to her? She gasped and pressed her hand over her thudding heart. This was beyond extraordinary. She glanced over her shoulder. If she shouted to her sisters, would the ghost fade into the woodwork?

Her curiosity overcame her fear. She squinted and saw the outline of a human shape taking form. The light was still too bright for her to discern more.

“I would appreciate the courtesy of an answer,” the voice continued, a hint of annoyance creeping into the words. “It is the least you can offer a guest in your house.”

“I am sorry. I am at a loss for words.” Jade did not add that such

a loss was a most unusual state for her. “You must admit that the common pleasantries are not appropriate. After all, you are a ghost!”

“Obviously.” The ghost’s tone suggested she was short of wits and that he was vexed by his current state. The light around him was easing, and she could see that he wore clothing of a very recent style.

But nobody had died recently at Nethercott Castle other than her beloved father. This specter was not Lord Nethercott, for he did not possess the girth her father had acquired along with his years. Nor did the voice belong to Father.

Deciding there was no reason for speculation, she simply asked, “Who are you?”

“I was Sir Mitchell Renshaw.”

Jade peered at the ghost emerging from the light. The sensation was rather like watching a faded painting regaining its color and texture. She could now see his rusty colored waistcoat and dark breeches draped over his thin form, but his face was a glowing blob beneath his hair that was almost the same shade as his waistcoat. “Why would Sir Mitchell Renshaw haunt Nethercott Castle? He called here only a few times.”

“To study with the Professor.”

Her breath caught. Even though her father had rightly held the title of Lord Nethercott, twelfth baron, he had preferred to be addressed as “Professor.” He had believed it more in keeping with his love for books and philosophy and science than a title bestowed on a distant relative who had done something to gain favor with a long-dead king.

“You are, I assume, one of the Professor’s daughters,” the spirit said.

“I am Jade Nethercott.”

“Which one are you?”

“The middle one.”

The ghost’s mouth twisted. Had he been wearing that expression before? His features were beginning to materialize, and they were the ones belonging to Sir Mitchell Renshaw. Even the freckles sprinkled across his cheeks above a fiery, bushy mustache were becoming visible. His waistcoat buttons appeared to be of fine gold, a surprise because burying a man with such affectations was an invitation to grave robbers to open his final resting space to relieve him of the riches.

“I thought you were the eldest,” he said, drawing her attention away from his amazing metamorphosis.

“That is China. And my sister Sian is younger than me by less than a year, Sir Mitchell.” She might as well address him as Sir Mitchell, because that was more comfortable than the idea that she was carrying on such a commonplace conversation with a ghost.

“I guess you will have to do.”

“Do? For what?”