

LAUREL'S GIFT EXCERPT:

Charlie let out a soft bark and stood back, her ears pricked while Laurel moved to the door.

He stood with his back to her, and a strange sensation crept up her spine and over her nape, until the hair on the back of her head stood up. "Hello." Laurel cleared her throat, and he turned.

"Good evening." He offered his right hand. "You must be Maggie's great niece." He wore a conservative pair of grey trousers and a black jacket over a white shirt, but no tie. Most people would describe him as attractive without being film-star handsome—with rugged good looks. That was the term that sprang to mind.

Laurel suddenly felt like a flustered teenager meeting her date for the prom as she shook his hand. His fingers were long, his grip firm. "Yes. I'm Laurel. And you must be Doctor Phillips."

"Eli."

"Come in, Eli." Laurel held the door wide. Charlie gave him a small woof of welcome then walked off, back towards the kitchen. Laurel had the strangest feeling that the dog knew him. "Have you been here before?" she asked.

He shook his head. His attention seemed to be taken—his eyes searching out something in the distance. As Laurel closed the door he stood before the ornate mirror. But he wasn't looking in it, more above it. That sensation heightened and she grew slightly nervous and couldn't work out why.

"Won't you come through to the living room?" She gestured to their left. He seemed to hesitate, and then his attention focused on the balcony above and immediately in front of them.

Laurel was becoming frightened now. What had she let herself in for? He'd barely spoken to her—yet he sounded so friendly on the phone.

With an infinitesimal shake of the head he turned to smile at her. And all her fears vanished. He looked a bit older than her, perhaps around thirty, his dark hair streaked with a slight touch of silver that gave him a very distinguished air. Brown eyes twinkled from beneath dark brows.

"This is a lovely home," he said, as they went through to the living room.

"Yes, isn't it? And it's so sad that Maggie probably won't be coming back here." Laurel sat on one of the easy chairs and he settled on the sofa facing her.

"Are you going to stay here?" He looped one foot over his other knee, completely relaxed.

"I doubt it. I have a problem though. I'm here to look after Aunt Maggie's pets and the worry is what will become of them." As if on cue Marmalade and Plum sauntered in, eyed the guest with interest, then sat in front of his chair and stared intently at him.

He laughed and it was a lovely sound. "Why, aren't you contemplating staying on? This house was meant to have children in it." He ran a hand over his chin, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry—you must think me weird."

Actually that was exactly what she'd been thinking. What a funny thing to say. Laurel shook her head, not agreeing or disagreeing with him.

His foot dropped to the carpet and he leant forward, his eyes intent as he regarded her. "Shall we go?"

Laurel had completely forgotten the intent was to go out to dine. "Of course. I'll just get my jacket."

He followed her from the room and while she went to get her jacket from the kitchen where she'd left it, he wandered around the foyer, the cats trailing him.

"You seem to have a fascination for this house," she murmured as she came back out, shrugging into her jacket. He helped her finish putting it on, saying nothing.

As she closed the front door after them, he said, "It's an interesting house."

He'd parked his car in front of the garage. "Interesting, you say. In what way?" He held the door open for her and after he'd closed it and come around to climb into the driver's seat he turned to face her. "Some houses give off certain vibes—this one is startlingly energetic."

Laurel gaped at him. Energetic? That was a strange word to use—one she herself would use to describe a place that was bursting with the presence of spirits.

As he rubbed his nape, Laurel noted he seemed to be chewing on his inner lip in contemplation. "I thought we'd go to a nice little restaurant I frequent—is that all right with you?"

Why did she have the feeling he'd been about to say something entirely different? "Yes. That suits me fine. I haven't had the chance to dine out since staying here and have to admit I don't know the district well."

He nodded, and as he drove she discreetly studied his profile. He drove with confidence, his well-manicured hands sure on the wheel. There wasn't a lot of traffic about and it didn't take long to reach the restaurant. Laurel was glad to enter a place where there were other people. If this proved to be a disaster she could always call a cab and escape. Problem was, if he turned out to be a weirdo he knew where she lived.

The owner of the restaurant greeted him by name, and it soon became obvious he was a regular diner here, to her relief. The waitress and wine waiter knew him well, treating him with friendly respect.

Once the wine and meal order were taken care of he sat back and smiled across at her. They'd been put in a secluded corner. Laurel returned his smile, sipping her wine.

"How does your boyfriend feel about you staying in Maggie's house?" he asked.

So dumbfounded by that question, Laurel stared at him mutely.