

phantom

The Collector *By Catherine Evans*

'I can't thank you enough for bringing me out here,' Robert said, glancing at the mansion appearing out of the mist before them.

'I think you're going to love Clara, and the house. It has a way of putting things into perspective,' Emily beamed as she parked, 'Did you bring your camera?'

He nodded.

'I'll let you take it all in while I open up.'

A raven cawed as he photographed the facade. Checking the picture, he could just make out the silhouette of a woman at the second floor window. Mist obscured his view, but when it cleared the figure was gone.

'I think your friend is already here,' he said, carrying in some bags, 'But I didn't see another car.'

'She probably is. The wine goes there and that bag goes in my room upstairs.'

A grand portrait dominated the double staircase—an Edwardian lady, in a bustled dress. She had Emily's eyes. As he took out his camera, Robert froze. A rustle of taffeta skirts passed just behind him. He turned, cautiously. Nothing ... it must have been the drapes?

He hesitated on the second floor. The electricity must have been out as there were candles everywhere. A door creaked, or was it a tree outside. Old houses, he thought, shivering.

The first room was clearly Emily's. Pictures surrounded the vanity and one had fallen onto the carpet. It was a younger Emily on a swing in the garden; next to her an older

girl with a bob in a pleated skirt. He put it back on the vanity. Depositing the bags and turning to leave, he jumped as the jewelry box on the vanity clicked open with a tinkling tune. He walked over and shut it gently. Strangely, the garden photo was now on the bed. A stuffed toy fell off a shelf and rolled towards him.

'Okay,' he said, 'okay ... leaving.'

A sensation of fingers ran lightly up the back of his hair and he bolted down the stairs. Relieved to hear voices, he headed for the kitchen. Emily—and the other girl from the photo—sat at one end of the table, chatting.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' Emily chuckled.

'Old houses, you know.' He laughed, nervously holding out his hand. 'You must be Clara, I'm Robert.'

'I am,' she said, but didn't take his hand. 'How did you meet Emily?'

'Um ... coffee shop?'

Clara raised an eyebrow at Emily.

Emily shrugged. 'That's where he was!'

'Are coffee shops forbidden?' Robert whispered to Emily.

'Wine?' she asked, cheerfully ignoring the comment.

The candles flickered, casting long shadows around the kitchen. A branch scratched the window.

'Wine would be great!' he said.

'No chardonnay?' Clara pouted.

'I'll check in the car,' Emily said, grabbing a candle.

'So, are you and Emily just friends?' Clara interrogated him.

Robert nodded emphatically. 'She found me at a difficult time. She's been the best.'

Emily returned, holding up the bottle, 'Chardonnay! And don't mind Clara she's a bit protective.'

Soon the familiar clink of glasses, good food and conversation put them at ease. It grew dark outside without them noticing. Mist enveloped the house.

'So life's been difficult?' Clara asked.

'I honestly don't remember one day to the next. I've been so tired... but I feel better now.' Robert smiled.

'This house is special. It's rumored to be built over the grave of an ancestor of mine,' Emily said mysteriously. 'A wise woman, who brings peace to all its inhabitants.'

'I thought it was just haunted,' Robert laughed.

'It's always been peaceful for me,' Clara sighed. 'Too peaceful. I wish I could see you more often,' she smiled at Emily, who blushed.

'Life gets in the way,' she replied. Clara rolled her eyes.

'So you grew up here?' Robert asked. 'I saw some photos upstairs.'

Emily nodded. 'I did, and Clara...'

'I was around,' she said, refilling his glass.

'And you guys are together?' he asked carefully.

'Of course,' Emily said, taking Clara's hand. 'Forever.'

'There are more photos here,' Clara continued, sliding over an album.

Robert flipped through it: birthdays, holidays, Emily's prom. Clara glaring at her date.

'You didn't go to prom, Clara?' he asked.

Clara scoffed, 'No, we didn't have proms.'

'Strict school?'

'Let's go with that,' she replied, and the candles danced.

Robert returned to the album. The birthday parties ... 5, 10, 17. Something didn't seem right. Clara in the background, unchanging, unnoticed. Perpetual. Robert went pale and swallowed hard. He knocked his glass over and the kitchen door slammed shut. The same rustle of taffeta passed on the other side. Emily cast Clara a disapproving glance, and she shrugged.

'You're a ...' Robert stammered. 'And you're in love with a ...' he trailed off, leaning back in his chair.

'Clara,' Emily said matter-of-factly, 'I am in love with a Clara. And yes she's a ghost.'

After a very long moment, Robert cleaned his glasses and exhaled slowly.

'It's unbelievable ... and beautiful, you together.'

'Well that's a first,' Clara said.

'What's it like?'

'Being a ghost? Well, it's hard to remember things. The photos help, and the house, it is special. I was so lonely until Emily. She can see us when most can't. I was here on my own with miss taffeta skirts out there, so she came up with the idea to find others who are, lost, I suppose.

'You collect lonely ghosts! That's so charming!' Robert laughed nervously.

'Why Robert, you're a romantic,' Emily sighed.

'What can I say, art student. Also, now I understand why you brought me here?'

'I doubt it,' Clara laughed.

'Emily must have realized I have the same gift—to see ghosts—and I'm a photographer, so you wanted me to come and take pictures of you two.' He beamed at his conclusion.

'Should I tell him, or do you want to?' Emily sighed sympathetically.

'It'll come to him,' Clara grinned, sipping her chardonnay.