

SHADOWLAND by Phillip Hampton

EXCERPT

The Housewarming Gift

There. How's that?" Donna pushed the couch into its new location, then looked over at Aaron.

Donna was obsessed with rearranging the furniture. She tried so desperately to recreate the warmth and feel of their brownstone in D.C.

"Aaron!" Donna screamed, pulling Aaron away from his thoughts. "For one second can you please focus and tell me what you think about the sofa being here rather than over there?"

Aaron envisioned the couch in its previous location. "I kind of liked it where it was."

"What do you mean you liked it where it was?"

Aaron had apparently hit a nerve. There was some lingering resentment from that morning. Aaron wished he had stuck to his customary response of "It looks great."

"Look, baby, it's fine. Okay?"

Socrates, the family cat, had taken a frontrow seat to the looming argument.

"That is not what you said." Aaron acted like he did not hear her. "Don't stand there like you don't hear me talking to you, Aaron Langford."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I said, what do you mean you liked it where it was?"

When the doorbell rang at that moment, Aaron was relieved to know he didn't have to explain himself right away. "Look, there's Otis and Teri. Can we talk about this later?"

"Oh, we're going to talk about 'this' later. You're not going to get off that easily."

Aaron hastily made his way to the door. This was the first time, since arriving in Seattle, Aaron would have a chance to spend time with his old college buddy. Aaron and Otis were more like brothers than friends. Otis was there for every major milestone in his life. He was the best man at Aaron's wedding. He was Asher and Imani's godfather. He consoled Aaron when Mother Dear died.

Otis ushered Teri in from out of the rain. "Hey, we're not late, are we?"

"Nah, you guys are right on time." Aaron embraced his old friend. "Thank God you're here."

"I heard you, Aaron," Donna said from somewhere behind him. "You guys are right on time. Dinner should be ready in a few minutes."

Otis had forewarned Aaron he was bringing a date, which was rare for him. It took a lot for Otis to be serious about a woman. Right away, Aaron could see why Otis was attracted to her. She was a light-skinned, curvaceous woman. Otis had a penchant for light skinned, shapely women. A direct contrast to his tall, lanky, features.

Donna took Teri by the hand and led her into the living room. By the expression on Donna's face, it was clear she was pleased to have another woman in the house.

As Donna and Teri made themselves comfortable, Otis whispered, "What's going on?"

"Donna's on the warpath."

Otis seemed to find humor in that tidbit of information. "What is it, PMS?"

"Hell, I wish. It's this whole move. It's not sitting well with her. I mean, she has rearranged the living room furniture five times this week. She's testy and ornery. The slightest thing sets her off."

"She rearranged the furniture five times?"

"Five times."

"She's that depressed?"

"Depressed is not the word; it's more like antsy. She misses being back in Washington, D.C. Not to mention, the chilly, overcast days are not helping."

"I know the weather takes some getting used to. Rest assured, when spring and summer roll around, and she sees how beautiful Seattle can be, she'll warm up to the city. There is no place more beautiful than Seattle in the summer. In the meantime, maybe you should consider taking her to a lodge in the Cascades, or even better, Whistler in British Columbia."

"Maybe she needs to get a job or start seeing patients again, so she can stop jumping down my throat," Aaron said. "How is that going?"

"There are a few more pieces of paperwork she needs to submit to the state, but she is taking her sweet time. She also has an opportunity to do some adjunct work at the university. She has an interview with the chair of the psychology department, but she keeps putting it off. A few community colleges have expressed an interest in her possibly teaching as well. Honestly, I don't think she will have any problem teaching or reviving her practice. The question is, does she want to?"

Well, if she doesn't like it here, and she doesn't have much to do during the day, what does she do to occupy her time?" Otis asked.

"She spends most of her time on the phone with her mother and rearranging the damn furniture."

"I surely hope you have a good cell phone plan."

"I'm not worried about my cell phone bill. I'm worried about my sanity!"

"I hear ya. I hope you don't mind? I brought a little something for Teri and me to drink." Otis held up a Cabernet Sauvignon, Aaron's favorite blend of wine.