

The Wedding Gift

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One

Mid-September

Adding a layer of coffee-ground compost around her blueberry bushes, Samantha eagerly glanced up at the putt-putt of the mail vehicle. *Today, let her career start today.*

She stood at the front gate, pulling off her gloves, by the time the gray-haired carrier stopped at the mailbox. In an unusual fit of domesticity this past weekend, Walker had painted the box a shiny silver, and she'd stenciled wild roses on it. A shared mailbox gave evidence they'd be married soon.

The carrier glanced at the large envelope before handing the mail to her personally. "Looks real official, Miss Moon."

She clasped it to her chest. "Thank you!"

Offering the smile that spoke for her when she didn't have words, she danced up the cobblestones to the bungalow she and Walker had rented these last months. Yellow roses bloomed over the porch roof, poking through the wisteria vines. In August, the purple flowers were long gone, but the roses planted by the last homeowner wrapped her in a heavenly perfume as she hurried inside.

With the paper crinkling in her hand, fear warred with her earlier excitement. Surely, if she'd been rejected, the envelope wouldn't be so large? If she'd been rejected—there weren't too many grants available for a beginning environmentalist living in the middle of nowhere. Icy fingers of gloom threatened to close in as she studied her fate in the form of a brown envelope.

She wanted to stay in Hillvale, *needed* to. This land was in her blood. In her genes. She'd only recently learned that Hillvale was who she was. Using her unique gift for growing things ought to be used for the town she meant to make her own.

But Hillvale offered few job opportunities, her trust fund was miniscule, and she refused to live off her fiancé's generosity forever. She needed her own purpose.

Should she wait for Walker to come home before opening it? No, this was hers alone. He didn't need to know if she'd been rejected.

Offering insane prayers to the universe, Sam carried the precious envelope to the crowded

bedroom where they'd set up two small desks and bookshelves as their office. She opened the envelope glue strip with care, not wanting to tear it. Maybe she should have invited the Lucys over to light candles and waft incense for good luck. As much as she respected the unusual gifts of her friends, she didn't think candles would help.

Removing the thick set of papers, and with her heart in her throat, she scanned all the legal verbiage. Not until she reached the line asking her to sign if she accepted did she melt into her chair and hold the contract as if she were burping a baby. *Hillvale* was her baby to nurture once she signed. She breathed deeply in satisfaction.

She'd done it—won the grant that would make her town a more productive place—and give her an income beyond waitressing. Her first real job outside the university!

Before she could examine the details or really let the joy sink in, the doorbell rang. Security-conscious, her city-bred police chief fiancé had installed cable, wi-fi, and a fancy camera doorbell in the aging bungalow. But this was very rural Hillvale, where one didn't even fear ghosts. Sam was floating too high on Cloud Nine to open her computer to see who was at the door. With no cell phone reception, she never carried her old phone either. That belonged to a prior life, one before Hillvale.

Leaving the contract on her desk, she crossed the tiny living space they were gradually making into their own and opened the carved oak door. She had to look down to see their visitor. The dainty China doll on the doorstep made her feel like a giant Elsa in comparison.

Self-conscious about her Nordic paleness in comparison to Walker's Chinese heritage, Sam hesitated in greeting this unexpected guest.

The woman had no such compunction. "I am Wan Hai. Jia Walker sends me as your wedding gift. I am expert in feng shui." She pointed at the roses descending from the roof. "Thorns do not welcome *chi*."

"Miss Wan, come in!" Shocked into action, Sam stepped aside and gestured welcome. Walker's mother had said she was sending a feng shui expert. Sam just hadn't expected one to appear on her doorstep.

"How did you get here?" A fair question since they lived on a lane with no driveways, barely room for a car, and there was no vehicle outside.

"You may call me Hai. I had the driver leave me in town. I walked up. Mrs. Walker tells me of the difficulties living here." She crossed the threshold rolling a large suitcase.

Sam eyed the suitcase with trepidation. “She should have told you to call Walker and let him know so he could have brought you up here.”

“Chen Ling is old friend. We thought we would surprise him.”

Chen Ling was Walker’s given name. He preferred to be called by his father’s surname. Or did he? Should she have asked? If this woman was an old friend, did she know more than Sam did? Hai looked more Walker’s age than Sam was—another point of concern. Walker was eight years older than Sam and worried he was too jaded for her. She glanced at the landline and wondered if she ought to call him, but his work took him all over town. She’d have to track him down.

Wan Hai took a seat in a padded leather recliner that dwarfed her. She had to sit up straight for her toes to almost reach the floor.

Sam made a mental note to add a few smaller chairs. “May I bring you something to drink? I was just getting ready for work, but I’ll call Walker. He’ll be excited to see you.”

“Water is fine. You need fountain at your door to welcome *chi*. And these chairs must be arranged so good energy flows naturally. Mrs. Walker mentions whole town needs my help, but I have never done a town.”

Sam poured a glass of filtered water, added a few cubes of ice from their miniscule refrigerator-freezer, and handed it to their wedding present. “I’ve been studying feng shui so I understand what Jia says about *chi*. I want Walker’s home to be as harmonious as the one his mother made for him. The front door is carved to welcome *chi*, one of the reasons we love this cottage.”

Hai nodded. “It is not what I would have there, but we can add a fountain and a river of pebbles. It will be good. If you go to work, you must leave me here. I will draw up plans while you are gone. Do you have a time you return? I can have dinner waiting.”

“Oh, no, we can’t have a guest cooking!” They usually brought food home from the café since neither of them were particularly domestic. They never brought guests to this tiny bungalow—which led to another horrified thought. “We’ll be happy to take you out this evening. Let me call Walker so he can let you settle in. . . Did Jia make reservations at the lodge for you?” she asked anxiously.

Studying the small living area with a frown, Hai waved a dismissive hand. “I can sleep anywhere. This chair is good. I saw a grocery in town. If you do not have the makings of a

proper meal, I will pick up some. A man needs food made with love.”

Sam’s jaw dropped. She bit her tongue closing it. All her inadequacies as a soon-to-be-wife rose to join her self-consciousness, and she simply wanted to crawl under her—very large—bed. “I’ll talk to Walker,” she managed to force from between clenched teeth. “We can’t have you sleeping in a chair.”

Or in the house or maybe even in Hillvale.

* * *

Like the other two men studying the three-foot doll sitting with an unblinking gaze on his chair, Police Chief Chen Ling Walker crossed his arms and frowned. “You want *me* to find who owned her last?”

Aaron, the tall, goateed antique dealer, nodded emphatically. “My psychometric skills detect only overwhelming love and no specific images or incidents. The auction house where I bought the trunk can only give me the dealer who sold it. Neither one knows anything about Sister Golden-Hair.” He gestured at the doll he’d named for her long blond hair.

Walker withheld judgment on Aaron’s *psychometric skills* or any other of Hillvale’s weird talents. Things happened in Hillvale that were inexplicable anywhere else—as evidenced by the weird toy occupying his chair.

“*Help me*,” Sister Golden-Hair repeated, for the third or fourth time.

“Her mouth doesn’t move.” Monty, the mayor, bent over to study the doll closer. “There’s nowhere to put a speaker.”

Wealthy enough to wear a Rolex but casual enough that his long brown hair hadn’t been properly barbered in months, the mayor shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t think the town can afford to pay Walker to investigate a haunted doll unless she’s committed a crime.”

“I’ll pay,” the antique dealer said. “I can’t bear to think there’s a child out there desperately hunting for a beloved toy, although I can’t imagine anyone giving a doll like this to a child.”

“Antique?” Walker asked. “The hair looks real.”

“I’m not a collector,” Aaron said. “I’ll need to look her up, but the cloth body is vintage, and hand-painted porcelain heads are rare. She even has porcelain feet and hands. It’s not a doll I’d give to a child. But it could have been assembled from other parts, so there’s no guarantee I’ll find anything on her in a catalog.”

“Help me,” the golden-haired doll repeated plaintively, in a high childish voice.

“That’s damned spooky.” Monty stepped back. “There ya go, Walker. Here’s your chance to start your very own paranormal detective agency.”

“I have my very own detective agency,” Walker said dryly. “It’s tough enough running a security firm in L.A. and handling this job at the same time. Let one of the town spooks start an agency.”

“Spooks, nice, Walker,” Aaron said caustically. “That’s almost as good as being called a *Lucy*.”

“What do you want to be called, a warlock? The Lucys call me a Null. I’m guessing that’s better than being called a Chink, but not by much.” Walker was reluctant to touch the toddler-sized doll slumped on the chair in his office. Despite the painted porcelain face, there was something a little too real about the way the doll sat. . . and talked.

“You do notice we are avoiding the real problem here, don’t you?” Monty asked.

“And that is?” Aaron asked testily.

“That two *Nulls* are hearing a doll talk when there is no visible means of communication,” Walker said, grasping the mayor’s point. “Monty and I don’t see or hear ghosts. We both hear Sister Golden-Hair.”

Arms crossed, all three men glared at the doll, which whimpered.

The warning bell Walker had installed over the downstairs door dinged. His office was on the second floor of Hillvale’s town hall. They had no receptionist, and the mayor was up here, so there was no one to greet whoever had entered.

“You’re shirking your duties again,” a feminine voice called up the stairs. “And I know you’re all up there because I can smell the coffee.”

Samantha. Walker smiled just thinking her name. “Come up if you want a cup.”

As if she would have stayed downstairs anyway. They all turned in anticipation as his bride-to-be clambered up the narrow wooden stairs. Samantha had a way of lighting a room with just her smile. Her creatively wavy platinum hair formed a halo around her face as she burst into the office. She hadn’t pulled it back in a bun yet for work.

“Ah, a city council meeting,” she said with a grin upon noting his company. And then she spotted the doll. “Oh, my, isn’t she gorgeous? May I?” She didn’t wait for an answer but scooped up the doll in her arms and rocked her as if she were a real infant, her face wreathed in

enchantment.

Walker winced. Sam wanted babies. His son had died in his arms because he couldn't protect him. He wasn't ready yet. . .

"Mama," the doll cried gleefully. "Mama!"

Oh shit. Was this a Lucy trick? The town's witches were capable of anything.

"Oh, she talks! I didn't know they made antique talking dolls." Returned to scientist mode, Sam expertly flipped the golden-haired doll over, opened the back of her lacy gown, and peered in surprise at the cloth body. "There's no speaker."

The doll began to cry.