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We know  
books

**THE  
MANOR  
OF  
DREAMS**

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**RENE  
GADE**

LBRIS

We know  
books

*part one: root*

根

*one*

AUGUST 2024

DAY 1 IN THE HOUSE

**NORA** Deng was informed of two rules before the reading of the will.

The first was not to speak to the Yin family without a lawyer present.

The second was to never go into the garden behind the Yin family house.

Nora didn't argue when her mother told her these rules. She didn't say much on the hour-and-a-half drive from their home in San Bernardino out west to Vivian Yin's estate. She'd already exhausted her questions days ago, when Mā shared over dinner that a former actress named Vivian Yin had died, and that their family was included in the will. It was the first time Nora had ever heard Vivian Yin's name. A quick search on her phone at the dinner table revealed that she was a Chinese American actress who was known for her movies in the eighties. She'd even won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, in a movie called *Fortune's Eye*.

Nora was surprised. How in her twenty-one years had she never heard of this person? There were a few scattered tributes to Vivian Yin on the internet. A brief *LA Times* section on her. Nothing more.

Nora also had no idea why they were included in the will. When she'd asked, her mother had given her a long, hard look. The kitchen light shone harshly over Mā's head, seeping into the lines around her eyes and reflecting off her silvery strands of hair. In Mandarin, she said, "I don't know."

"Is there some family connection? Are we a long-lost relative?" Nora

had seen that in the movies; people plucked from suburban anonymity to discover that they were heirs to royalty. That would be nice.

“No,” Mā said sharply. “Why would you think that?”

“So we don’t know them and they don’t know us?”

Her mother paused. “My parents knew her.”

“Then . . . we’re family friends?”

Mā’s lips flattened into a thin line. “Will you help me clear the dishes?”

That Saturday they took the exit off the I-210 in the direction of the forest. The San Gabriel Mountains loomed in the distance. Nora glanced out at the low, misty morning clouds. Today was unusually overcast for August.

The house was in Altadena and rose up out of the hills. Mā turned onto a lone road that ended at rusted gates. She didn’t pull into the elongated driveway. Rather, she idled to a stop beside the curb. “Remember,” she said. “Don’t wander by yourself. Don’t go into that garden behind the house. Okay?”

This house was large; Nora hadn’t realized that until they got out of the car. There was a strange, dismal beauty to this place. It looked abandoned, almost sunken in shrubbery. The front yard was overgrown, the grass yellowing. Shriveled, emaciated vines crawled up the pale stone walls. But it still possessed a gentle grandeur that drew Nora’s attention, with its symmetrical sloping roofs, the balconies framing tall, arched windows crowned by florid embellishments, and the elegant curve of the front door that stood behind two columns.

As they walked up to the front door, Nora saw a minivan parked to their left in the circular courtyard and driveway in front of the house.

“Nora,” her mother said. “Promise.”

Nora glanced over. She tucked her short hair behind her ears and tugged up her jeans. Mā’s gaze unnerved her just a bit. “Okay.”

The cavernous doors opened.

**MADLINE** Wang sat at her grandmother’s dining room table the day after her funeral and looked at the person sitting across from her, who happened to stare right back. This person—Nora Deng, she’d

introduced herself as—looked to be around Madeline’s age, right out of college or maybe still in it. Cropped hair fell around her sharp jawline. Her fingers toyed with a loose thread on her sleeve. Slightly to Nora’s right was a middle-aged woman wearing an ill-fitting red sweater, whom Madeline assumed was her mother, Elaine Deng.

So *she* was the person Mā was talking about on their way here. The one person outside the family who made it into the will.

Madeline felt small in here. The ceiling stretched over them. Spare, listless light filtered through the drawn curtains, revealing the thick layer of dust on the long mahogany table. The house had this persistent and unpleasant sour smell of mildew and damp wood, and the chairs groaned every time someone shifted positions. Madeline silently urged the white man presiding at the head of the table to just read her grandmother’s will already and get it over with.

Her chair creaked loudly, and her mother shot her a look. Lucille Wang clasped her hands and looked ahead expectantly. She’d strategically taken a seat closest to the lawyer, her notepad in front of her. Her dark hair was pulled back in a bun. A half-inch or so of silver roots showed. She wore a navy blazer. Madeline knew this was her war suit. Mā was a lawyer too, and in this moment she was making sure everyone knew it. Madeline’s yí mā, Aunt Rennie, on the other hand, leaned away from the table and looked like she wanted to disappear. She wore an oversized shawl-like cardigan. Her dark brown hair was starting to slip out of its clip.

The lawyer cleared his throat. Madeline was sitting close enough that she could see the name on his binder. *Reid Lyman*. “Are we all settled?”

Madeline nodded with everyone.

“We are gathered here to hear the last will and testament of Vivian Yin.” He had a deep voice. “I have been named the executor of the will. Thank you to all parties for being present for the reading upon her request.”

Madeline remembered precisely the day and the moment when her mother came home early from work. Mā had entered the living room with a vacant look in her eyes and dropped her bag to the ground, and

that was when Madeline found out her grandmother was dead. They'd sat on the couch together in silence for what could have been minutes or the better part of that day. Mā then called Aunt Rennie; it went to voicemail twice before she'd picked up. When her aunt finally answered the phone, Mā disentangled herself to go upstairs and shut herself in her room.

And then, that next day, her mother abruptly kicked into action. She drafted the obituary and planned the funeral, which had originally consisted of her and Madeline and Aunt Rennie. Madeline's dad eventually came up for the day, a gesture of kindness that softened her mother, if only momentarily. She pestered the *LA Times* to include the obituary, calling the Entertainment desk over and over.

And then, finally, Mā told Madeline about Wai Pó's house. "We'll just stay there for a short time," she'd said. "You and me and your yí mā. Two weeks at most to get everything in order. And then we sell it."

"But that's your childhood home," Madeline had said. "Don't you want to keep it?"

"No. We don't."

They'd driven up two hours from their home in Newport Beach with their bags that Sunday morning. They were all supposed to meet at the house an hour before the reading of the will; Aunt Rennie didn't come until fifteen minutes before, citing car issues and having needed to hail a rideshare. Mā was slightly irked. But now they were all here. Madeline arched her head up, staring at the way the reddish ceiling beams curved toward each other with intricate wood carved corners, observing this house as she would an artifact in a museum. Whatever had been painted up there was long faded, cracks splitting through the paint.

She felt detached from this place. Her mother was the one who grew up in this house, with Aunt Rennie, with Madeline's grandmother—her wai pó—who once was an actress in Hollywood. 外婆 had been married to another actor, too, named Richard Lowell; Aunt Rennie's father and Mā's stepfather. He'd died when Mā was seventeen and Aunt Rennie was fourteen. And then Mā left for college and never really lived here again.

Suddenly Madeline's passing curiosity twinged into a sharp longing to have lived here; to have known her grandmother beyond her fleeting childhood memories. When she was little, Wai Pó would come to their house in Newport Beach. She would make dumplings for lunch. Then 外婆 would take her to the nearby park, her hand clutching Madeline's.

But then she started fading from their lives. Mā wanted Wai Pó to sell her house and move in with them; Wai Pó refused. She turned down holidays. Mā tried calling her, but she would rarely answer. When Madeline was eleven, she watched a pixelated, pirated version of the movie that won her grandmother her Oscar, *Fortune's Eye*, where Wai Pó played a Chinese American woman looking for her brother in the gold rush. The camera work was jarring, the music brassy and melodramatic, but still her grandmother was captivating in every scene. It felt strange, unauthorized almost, to witness the younger, animated version of the person who now shut them out. Madeline never mentioned it to anyone; no one ever brought that movie up.

"The first matters are of her finances," the lawyer said, bringing Madeline back to the present. Her mother leaned forward. "To her daughters: Yin Chen, Lucille Wang, and Yin Zi-Meng, Renata Yin-Lowell—she intends to distribute a sum of forty thousand dollars to be divided as the two beneficiaries see fit."

Madeline watched Mā's glance dart down the table at Aunt Rennie. "That's—" She swallowed her words. "Forty thousand?" she said, in hoarse Mandarin. Aunt Rennie was frozen. And then, almost immediately, Mā's shock folded shut. "There must be a mistake," she said in English.

The girl across from Madeline just watched, her expression flickering with scorn. Madeline felt jarred by Mā's outburst. It still was a substantial figure. Madeline wanted to melt into the floor. How much money had they been expecting, exactly?

But then again, if her grandmother lived in *this* place, shouldn't she have had more?

Mā was still bewildered. "This is the entirety of her inheritance? What about her accounts? Her investments?"

"This was all decided on," the lawyer said. "The monetary inheritance. And for the next—"

"We're not done here. Where's the rest?"

"Let him finish, will you?" Elaine Deng finally spoke up.

Mā's glance cut over to the woman across the table. "I'm sorting out *my* family matters."

Elaine said nothing more but smiled, spitefully polite. Aunt Rennie reached out a hand. "It's okay," she said softly, sounding unsure herself. "There's the house."

"Which leads us to the next clause," the lawyer said. "The estate." He shifted in his chair and looked, not at Mā, not at Madeline's side of the table, but to the two people seated across from them. "Vivian Yin has decided that upon her death, the ownership of this estate and all its matters will hereby be transferred to Elaine Deng."

*two*

AUGUST 2024

DAY 1 IN THE HOUSE

**RENATA** Yin-Lowell flinched as Lucille stood abruptly, her chair skidding backward. Rennie watched in slow motion as it tipped over. The back of the chair slammed into the ground and everyone jumped. “This house belongs to us.”

Elaine retorted, “That’s not what the will says.”

“It’s ours,” Lucille insisted. She righted her chair. “Our dad’s family lived here for generations. Our mother lived here for the past fifty years. You’re not taking it away from us.”

“Like you wouldn’t immediately put it on the market to make up for that pathetic inheritance your mother gave you?” Elaine’s voice was caustic. Next to her, the girl stared at Rennie with the same contemptuous look.

While Rennie racked her mind for anything to say to back Lucille up, she registered something in the corner. A figure materialized. But it was quite hazy when she tried to look at it straight on.

She clutched the edge of her seat and blinked, hard. Nothing. It was nothing! Just dust in the sun.

“It belongs to us!” Lucille’s raised voice hauled Rennie’s attention back to the table. “None of this should have been allowed to happen.”

“What, your mother isn’t allowed to decide what to do with her own house?” The girl finally spoke, tipping her chin up. Her short hair framed insolent narrowed eyes.

Lucille’s cheeks suffused with color. Elaine said in a low voice,

“Nora. Let me handle this.” She spread out her palms. “I don’t know why I was added to the will—”

“Don’t you?” Rennie’s sister spoke quietly, in that cool, lethal tone. She turned to the lawyer, Reid Lyman, who peered at them through his glasses with a slightly bewildered expression. He looked familiar, though Rennie couldn’t place him. “Was the will changed recently?”

Reid shifted. “It was, actually.”

“When?”

“A few . . . well, two weeks ago. Late July.”

Lucille then turned to Elaine. “Well. The will gets conveniently changed shortly before our mother’s death so that you get the estate. Isn’t that interesting?”

“What are you implying?”

Lucille tilted her head.

Elaine stood too, her petite frame belied by her flashing eyes. “Believe me. I knew nothing about this will before today. I’m here because I was *asked* to come. By your mother.”

Lucille’s gaze shifted to Rennie. She couldn’t play hardball like Lucille, but she could plead their case. She cleared her throat. “Come on. This isn’t—fair to us.”

It sounded feeble even as she said it. Her older sister pursed her lips slightly, in a way that indicated her disappointment.

“Fair,” Elaine said slowly. “The daughters of Hollywood elite want to talk about what’s fair.”

The shimmering in the corner was back. *It wasn’t dust.* Rennie’s heart tapped out a wild beat. A prickling sensation came over her. She rocked onto the edge of her seat. Her niece, Madeline, glanced at her, and Rennie tried desperately to stay calm.

“Our mā came to this country as an immigrant,” Lucille said. “She, more than anyone, *worked* for this—”

“And you expected to step right into it,” Elaine said. “Maybe this was her way of telling you that you didn’t deserve this. The *great* Vivian Yin has passed on, and all you say in her memory is that the money she left you is nothing. All you care about is who inherits her home.” She pursed her lips in disgust. “Look at the state of this place. Did you even

care for her in her last years? Or did you just abandon her in this house and leave her to die?"

Rennie curled into herself, feeling sick.

"Don't you dare speak about our family like that," Lucille spat. "You don't know us. You never did."

In that split second a figure appeared behind Elaine. Rennie was immediately flooded with a childlike burst of relief as she looked upon her mother. *She's back; she's here to explain things—*

And then she remembered that they were all here because Mā was very dead.

Her mother grabbed the back of Elaine's chair and looked straight at Rennie. She was wearing the same blue blouse as she had been the last time Rennie saw her. Her inky eyes bulged. Mā opened her mouth wide, as if to say something, and dirt spilled out.

Rennie lurched up, pointing, just as her mother disappeared. Everyone stared at her in alarm. She bolted from the room, heaving the contents of her stomach into her purse.

She settled on the cold granite floor of the empty foyer against the banister of the stairway and stared high up, where the chandelier glittered. The ridged ceiling plaster was cracking. Strange, discolored stains dripped down the wall now, like spindly, elongated fingers. She didn't want to go back into the library and face the other family. Or hers. Because what Elaine had said was exactly what her mā had told her the last time Rennie visited her.

A visit Rennie wouldn't ever tell anyone about.

She hadn't told Lucille what their mother had looked like then. How paper-thin her skin seemed, how pale she was in the waning light. How it seemed a miracle that Mā was sitting up at the kitchen table, as if she was animated only by her furious gaze.

How pathetic Rennie was, coming to ask her for money.

"看," her mā had said, looking off to the side. *Look*. "She's back."

Rennie didn't know what to say then. *Who's back?* Her mother refused to even look at her. But she simply nodded. If she wasn't desperate, she would never have come in the first place. She had returned in hopes that her mother would do what she had always done: bail