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Clues to the Universe

Ruby Lost and Found

THE
MANOR
OF
DREAMS

a novel

CHRISTINA LI

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To my found family

“To hold the garden’s fragrance in one vase;
And see all autumn in a single spray?”
—Cao Xueqin, “The Crab-Flower Club”
(Dream of the Red Chamber)

THE
MANOR
OF
DREAMS

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, Wài 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 Wài Pó to sell her house and move in with them; Wài 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 Wài 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

Rennie out. After a nasty, expensive divorce with a manipulative and powerful art collector, and a career dead end with ruinous amounts of credit card debt, she thought that her situation was dire enough that Mā might be sympathetic.

“The thing about you, my daughter”—she spat the last word out—“is that you became soft. You never grew up to be great.” Her breath rattled in her chest. She coughed, and spittle dripped from her lips. “You’re waiting around, aren’t you?” Mā accused. “I know what you’re thinking. Who gets the money, who gets the house? I built this up. I endured more than you can imagine. And now you and your sister are just circling me. Like vultures.”

“No,” Rennie whispered. “No, *no*, that’s not—”

“And you didn’t—*call me*.” Her mother’s voice collapsed into a croak. Rennie wanted to fall on her knees right then and there and weep. The sky had darkened in the windows. “All those years. You only ever came when you wanted to take something from me.”

“Mā,” Rennie pleaded.

“You were the one I wanted to hear from the most. You were the most like me, my 亲女儿.” In the dim light Rennie could see that her mā’s teeth were darkened and rotted. Mā’s eyes narrowed. “You became the cruelest.”

Those words had punctured Rennie, and she’d lost all sense of feeling. She’d turned on her heel and stumbled out of the house to her car. She had driven by instinct down the deserted road, away from the house, in the dusk, not realizing that her headlights were busted until she was almost a mile out.

Now, Rennie leaned against the staircase. She couldn’t stand to be here. She wasn’t capable like Lucille, who could bend things to her iron will. Rennie was simply ready to give in. Twenty thousand was enough for a few more months on her sublet and some crucial payments. She just wanted to leave with the money. But she knew Lucille would never leave without the house. If anyone could negotiate to get it back, it was her.

And if that happened, it would be worth staying.

She collected herself and went back into the dining room, leaving

her purse out in the foyer next to the stairs. All eyes latched on to her. “Sorry.” She swallowed the remnants of her stomach acid. “I’m back.”

Her older sister’s eyes narrowed in question. Rennie kept her gaze blank. Lucille looked back toward Reid. “As I was saying. I would like to discuss this with my family in private. Will you excuse us?”

Elaine looked toward the lawyer. He paused. “Of course. I can give you a moment to discuss this in private.”

“Yes,” Lucille said. “Just a moment.”

LUCILLE herded her daughter and sister into what used to be their family’s library and shut the doors behind her. She strode across the room to the office table in front of a wall of inlaid bookshelves, and they followed her. Rennie still looked ill. Lucille frowned. “Are you okay? What was that?”

Rennie nodded, not quite meeting her eyes.

Then Madeline said, “Did Wai Pó really . . . cut us out? Of her will?” Her daughter stood uncertainly to the side, her arms wrapped around her willow frame.

Lucille shook her head. “I don’t think that’s what happened.” She nodded toward the door. “Okay. She was involved in our mā’s death. I’m sure of it.”

Madeline tilted her head. Rennie looked up.

Lucille mouthed, *Elaine*.

She watched the shock fall over both.

“I was watching her the entire time. She told me to let him finish reading the will. It was like she knew she was getting the house. Her face gave it away when I pressed her on it. She looked guilty. Didn’t she?” Lucille had decades of cases under her belt as a personal injury attorney. She’d conducted enough depositions to know how someone’s expression could reveal a key truth. She could sense it; the way Elaine’s eyes had widened the moment Reid read out the terms of the estate. It hadn’t been a look of surprise. It had been one of fear.

“Lucille,” Rennie whispered. “You’re saying she could have—?”

Lucille nodded.

“Are you sure?” Rennie asked. “That’s—that’s too far, isn’t it? There

could have been so many other reasons. Maybe Mā . . . changed her mind! Or had some kind of dementia. Or—”

“You think Mā had such severe dementia she accidentally gave the entire house to *Elaine Deng*?”

Rennie chewed on her bottom lip.

Lucille told herself to focus on the facts. “The will was changed two weeks ago. She was found dead a week ago. Elaine hasn’t spoken to us in thirty-four years. She walks back into our lives the morning the will is read. The timing can’t be a coincidence.”

“Elaine said she had no idea,” Rennie said.

“And we believe her?” Lucille paused. “After everything that’s happened?”

“What happened?” her daughter asked. “How do you guys know each other?”

Silence.

“She knew our family,” Rennie said quietly. “Elaine’s parents worked for us.”

Madeline nodded. Her expression changed slowly. “*Oh.*”

“There’s also an autopsy report with a toxicology component,” Lucille cut in before Madeline could ask another question. “We won’t get finalized reports for months, but the preliminary results should be in soon.”

She had ordered it as an errant precaution. The doctor said it was a heart attack. But Lucille had a feeling. When Mā hadn’t been answering her repeated calls in late July, she had reached out to the nursing agency. It was then that Lucille found out that Mā had fired her nurse several weeks ago. Lucille had hired a new nurse, only for the nurse to go to their house and call Lucille, shrieking, that their mother was collapsed on the back terrace. Her body was long cold and stiff. Already in the stages of decomposition.

Lucille had ordered the toxicology report because of a gut feeling. She didn’t trust that old nurse. Maybe something—wrong medication, some kind of neglect—had led to her mother’s death. But now Lucille thought about Elaine in the dining room, successfully having swept their inheritance out from under them.

Now she had a new gut feeling. No—something more certain than that.

“So,” Rennie said slowly, “if Elaine were involved . . .”

“Then it would be a murder case,” Lucille said. Madeline’s eyes widened. Lucille tried to keep her voice steady. “We take this to court. She no longer is a beneficiary of the will. There’s a term for it. The slayer statute, I think.”

Rennie shuddered at the phrase. “That’s dramatic.”

Lucille considered her younger sister. It was strange, seeing her age. Even with the emerging wrinkles around her eyes, she still had this lost dreaminess to her, something Lucille had come to resent over the years. Rennie had always been the softer one. Too willing to believe people at their best. Lucille felt both irritation and pity. Her voice hardened. “So, what? We lose the house and let her get away with this?” She paused. “Just wait until the autopsy report comes in. Okay? Trust me. I know something’s wrong here.”

Rennie shrank and crossed her arms. “Okay. Okay. I trust you.”

There was a knock on the door. They turned.

“What do we do now?” Madeline whispered. “What do we say to them?”

“We should leave,” Rennie insisted. “We can figure this out outside the house.”

“We can’t,” Lucille said tightly. “They’ll never let us back in. They’ll change the locks on us. We need to stay here or we’ll be shut out.” She stared her sister down. Rennie had to see that there was no other way.

Her sister didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Fine,” she said faintly. “How do we do that?”

Of course now it would come down to Lucille to scrape things together. She was always the one to be there for Rennie when she crashed and burned, to hire nurses and staff for Mā in her aging years. And now she was the only one who could contest the will. She wasn’t an estate lawyer, but she was a lawyer. She could investigate the circumstances of her mother’s death. She had to step up. Within seconds she pieced together a plan. She steadied herself against the table for a moment and then faced her family.

“We need to buy time. We’re going to go out there and say that we need a few days in the house to sort through our mother’s things. The preliminary autopsy should come in the next few days. And during that time, I’ll figure out what happened between Elaine and Mā before her death. If Elaine did indeed have something to do with it—” Her voice dropped. “We get justice for ourselves. And for Mā.”

NORA watched Vivian’s family file into the dining room. They sat back down in their chairs quietly.

“All right,” the lawyer said, his dark eyes settling on each person around the table in turn. “Should we proceed? Are there any further questions?”

“Reid, we’d like to make a request,” one of the women spoke. The pushy one with the sharp suit jacket. Lucille. “There was no specification as to whom the tangible property in the house belongs to. Which means that by California probate code, it de facto belongs to us. The surviving relatives.”

Legal jargon. Nora exchanged a look with her mother.

“Come on,” the other woman—Renata?—said. She leaned in and searched their gazes with doe-like, brown eyes. “You don’t want my mother’s old clothes, do you?”

She was the one who acted weirdly, pointed at Nora’s mother, and ran out. She seemed a little . . . scattered. But earnest. Her hands were shaking. Nora actually felt a pang of sympathy for her.

“No,” her mother conceded, though Nora could tell she was irritated. “You can have that.”

“Thank you,” Lucille said. “Can we have a few days to collect her belongings? There are . . .” She looked around the dining room. “Many things of hers. We’d like time to process.”

A long moment passed. Reid, the lawyer, looked to her mother. Nora did too.

Her mother took a deep breath and nodded. “Just a few days.”

“Okay,” Lucille said. “We’ll stay here, then.”

Mā stiffened at Lucille’s statement. “As will we.”

Lucille set her jaw. Reid glanced around uncertainly. “Well,” he said.

“In that case, if everyone has reached an agreement, I will leave it at that. A copy of the will has been forwarded to your emails. If you have any more questions, here is my business card.” He stood and shuffled the files into a manila folder. Nora saw him glance at Lucille one last time before he gathered his things and hurried out.

Nora watched the Yin family leave the room and go upstairs. The daughter looked over her shoulder and met Nora’s eyes for a fraction of a second. She looked just like Lucille. Beautiful and brittle, with full lips and rounded cheekbones. She wore pearl earrings, and Nora thought she saw the glimmer of gold rings on her fingers. She’d said virtually nothing. But her calm gaze had needled into everything. Private school pedigree, some Ivy probably, Nora assumed. Not that it mattered. They would never cross paths again after this.

Nora had a weird feeling. Before Vivian’s family had gathered in the library, they had been so adamant about the house. Now there was no mention of it. She had known them for all of an hour, but they didn’t seem like the type to back out without a fight. Especially not that prickly lawyer, who now marched them up the stairs.

“They’re already taking the second floor,” Mā muttered to Nora. “Of course they are.”

“Why did you let them stay?” Nora asked in Mandarin.

Her mother turned to look at her. Her gray hair was fraying out of its bun. “They’re grieving, Jiā-Jiā.” She used Nora’s Mandarin name. Her voice had softened, and Nora knew she was thinking about her own late mother, who’d passed away when Nora was fourteen. “I am not cruel. This is my last favor to them. And then we will never have to see them again.”

“And what about this house?”

“We’ll sell it.” Mā lowered her voice. “It’ll pay for your medical school. And we can donate the rest. I have a few organizations in mind.”

three

AUGUST 2024
DAY 1 IN THE HOUSE

NORA'S mother clearly knew her way around the house. She led Nora out of the dining room, across the massive ivory-tiled ocean that was the foyer, into another dim hall, and then, finally, to one of the rooms at the end. "You can hang out in here. Keep an eye on them if you hear anything," she said. "But don't talk. I'm going to go back home to get some things for our stay. *Don't* leave the house until I'm back."

"Okay."

"The oldest is a lawyer. You really can't say a word."

"I'm not dying to talk to these people," Nora said wearily. "Don't worry."

Now she was alone on the first floor. She could hear the voices of the Yin women talking upstairs. She started to climb the staircase, thinking she could eavesdrop a little, but the wood creaked under her feet. She gave up and decided to take herself on a tour of the house.

The rooms stretched on, stale and airless. Off to the right was the dining room they had sat in for the reading of the will. The foyer contracted into a hallway as it led to the back of the house, and at the other end Nora could see leather couches and a ticking grandfather clock. The living room, she guessed. But she was more interested in the door on her left, with a set of detailed wrought iron knobs. The room in which Lucille had gathered her family for a private discussion. Nora pulled the doorknob. It stuck for a moment, but with a few tugs and

some jiggling, she got it open. Once she stepped in, it swung smoothly shut behind her.

Nora arched her head up to take in with awe the high, vaulted ceilings, the built-in shelves, the inlaid chestnut-colored cabinets. The wall panels were a sun-paled mahogany color, glowing reddish in the afternoon light that flowed in through arched windows constructed of thick, geometric panes of glass. Silk screens painted with elaborate mountains and clouds perched behind the twin armchairs in the corner, with a green glass lamp poised between them.

These people were *rich* rich. Across the room there was a discolored rectangular expanse on the wall, as if a painting had been removed. A mid-century desk stood in front of what looked like a sealed fireplace. Built-in bookshelves rose on either side. Windows lined the left wall, the view outside obstructed by strands of ivy, though Nora could see the circular driveway through the patches the vines didn't cover.

On the desk was an archaic-looking desktop computer straight from the mid-2000s, with that giant, blocky computer case. She eased out the chair and sat on it gingerly. It was made with some saggy upholstery. The desk had drawers underneath it. She tugged on the one in the middle and found magazines, flaked and brittle with age and water damage. A spread of photos. Nora stared at a young woman with black hair that crested around her shoulders and lips dark with lipstick.

There was a bright magnetism to her eyes, even in this discolored, creased photo. A beauty mark under her right eye. *Should I know you?* She stood and surveyed the sprawling bookshelves. Some titles she knew. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Woolf, Thoreau. There were some Chinese texts, too. Nora only knew some of the words in passing from her years at Chinese school. She recognized one: 红楼梦. *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

She pored over the philosophy section. Rawls. Rousseau. Her mother had been a philosophy major. She'd studied it along with political science at Berkeley. She was two years into her PhD in political philosophy when she'd gotten pregnant with Nora and dropped out. She'd always said that leaving school was independent of having Nora. Academia

wasn't for her anyway. Grad school funding wasn't enough to support herself, much less two. And it had always been just the two of them: whichever man had pitched in for her existence didn't stick around. If anything, her maternal grandparents had helped raise her.

Nora sensed that her mother gave up more than she let on. Mā could have been a professor or diplomat instead of working a dull city government admin job that Nora knew she didn't like. These days, what really animated her mother was the organizing work she did on the weekends—driving around, canvassing for housing justice coalitions in San Bernardino and Riverside, phone banking.

Nora eyed a copy of a collection of poems by W. B. Yeats. It jutted out ever so slightly. She'd just touched the spine when the door behind her opened and heels clicked in.

“Oh,” Lucille said.

They stood and looked at each other for a moment.

Lucille gestured to the phone in her hand. “I need to take a call in here. Do you mind?” Her voice was clipped.

Nora raised an eyebrow. “What, the fifteen other rooms in this house are all occupied?”

Lucille froze. Nora threw a polite smile over her shoulder as she left the room. She could feel the lawyer's eyes drill into her back. *Good*, Nora thought. *I've rattled her.*

LUCILLE watched the girl go. She shut the library doors with more force than required and the hinges groaned. She winced. She couldn't take her anger out on this place. The house had fallen into disrepair. The faucets were rusted, and the sink handles screeched. Certain balusters on the stairs had come loose. Cracks and stains crept down the walls. Old paint warped and bubbled. And dust seeped and clumped in every ridge in the crown molding and the baseboards, along the windowsills and the mantels. Dirt, too. *How did so much dirt get in here?*

The house was like one filthy, skeletal husk. The last time she had been here was five years ago, but she hadn't made it beyond the foyer then, and now, as she ventured farther into the house, she could see just how much it had decayed.

Lucille sat down at the desk. The cushion sagged underneath her. She pulled out her phone and stared at her ex-husband's number for a few long moments. At her mother's funeral he'd found her in a spare room she'd shut herself in. He'd cradled her, and it had been almost too much, being shown unusual tenderness by someone who'd ruined their marriage years ago with an affair. Still, he had shown up to her estranged mother's funeral, an act of enormous kindness. Now, here in the library study, she called him.

He picked up on the second ring. "Lucy?"

She closed her eyes at the calm, deep sound of his voice and her old nickname. "Hi. I need advice. Assurance, really." They had always loved discussing cases back in the day, late at night, curled into each other on the couch, books pushed among empty beer bottles and take-out on the coffee table. In many ways, he was still the one who knew her best.

"Sure thing. But before that, how are you doing? How's Madeline?"

"Fine." Lucille swallowed. "Mā gave the house to *Elaine*."

There was a pause. "Who?"

"Elaine. Deng. Daughter of Mā's former housekeeper. From ages ago. Of all people." She shook her head. "It makes no sense why *she* would ever be the beneficiary of anything from Mā. But here's the thing. The will was changed two weeks ago."

"Okay. That's odd."

"I was looking at Elaine the whole time. She looked like she knew. I think something's up with her." She paused. "You're following me, right?"

"Ah." His voice hardened. "So you think—"

"I know, Daniel. I can't explain it."

"And is there evidence? An autopsy report?"

"Ordered with a toxicology report. Just waiting for the results. There's a case here, isn't there? From a legal standpoint?"

"Have you consulted a probate lawyer?"

"You're family law. That's adjacent. Come on. I just need your thoughts on the situation."

"That's . . . Okay. There could be. You'd have to prove that it was intentional and without legal justification."

“As in, Elaine didn’t kill Mā in self-defense? Yeah. I doubt that.” She straightened up. “Thank you for your read.”

“Really, Lucy. I’ll pass on a contact of mine. Alexis Kahan. From our year at Stanford. It’s no problem. He’s taken care of things like this before.”

“Sure.” She cleared her throat. “I don’t know. I might keep this to myself for a bit. Family matters are always . . . delicate.”

There was a long silence. “You’re not thinking of taking this on yourself, are you?”

She fixed her eyes on a book that was sticking out from the others on a shelf. “And what if I did?”

“This is entirely different from your kind of litigation, Lucy.”

A part of her knew he was right. But she pushed on. “I’m allowed to. Legally, I can. And I know this family best.”

“You have a tendency to take on too much. More than you can handle.”

“Now what does that mean?”

He sighed. “I don’t want to get into it. You know what I’m talking about.”

She knew he was referencing her failed congressional campaign. It always came back to this. It had marked the end of her political aspirations and her marriage. Things were never the same after that. “Well,” she said scathingly. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. And the honesty.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

“No, I mean it.” She ended the call and stared at the screen. *Mistake.*

She let her gaze drift to the desktop computer in front of her. She reached out and pressed the power button. She must have bought this for Mā decades ago. It whirred to life and dust motes billowed out.

It still worked. A miracle. She shut it back off.

Lucille stood up and stretched, facing the bookshelves in front of her. She’d spent weekend afternoons reading across from Dad in the armchairs, the glow of the green lamp between them, books stacked high on the table. They’d talk about the news and international

institutions and moral fallacies, until Mā came in and told them it was dinnertime. President Lucy, Dad used to call her, the affectionate moniker he bestowed upon her when she argued at the dinner table. President Lucy. What an embarrassment. In the end, she couldn't even win her own congressional district.

The book that stuck out was a collection of poems by Yeats. What had made the girl choose this book? Lucille pulled it out and cracked open the book.

Something fell from inside the brittle pages. A dried rosebud, and then a line, in faint penciled underline.

When all the wild Summer was in her gaze.

Lucille slammed the book shut and shoved it back on the shelf. She sank into a chair. She held up the rosebud and it crumbled in her hands. A slow, cold awareness washed over her, as if she were inching herself into an ice bath, until she plunged in all at once. Her breath quickened. She was out of her body, watching herself panic. She could do nothing but sink into it and wait.

Eventually—after a few minutes? An hour?—her heartbeat slowed. Lucille pushed herself to stand, feeling dizzy. She took a moment to steady herself on the desk. She had to leave this library for now.

Eventually she ended up at the dining table, watching the dining room chandelier gleam dully above her. The expanse of mahogany stretched out before her. An hour ago she'd faced off against Elaine. In many ways it had been like it used to be. The two of them sitting across from each other over dinner. Locked in ongoing debates. Both sides refusing to let up. But now this wasn't about lofty subjects like socialist collectivism or nuclear disarmament; this was about her mother's death.

I do everything for you. I am setting you up to be great. Remember that. Mā told them this on the nights she came home late from days on set and film premieres, her permed hair loose around her shoulders, her sweet, velvety Guerlain perfume settling around them as she shrugged off her fur coat and slid out of her slingback kitten heels. After filming on location, she would come back to tell them how much she had missed them. How much she loved them; how she couldn't wait to see

what they would do to make her proud. What happened? Had her love dried up? Had they disappointed her so deeply that she wanted to bar them from their childhood home?

Did you even care for her in her last years? Elaine's spiteful words tormented her now. *Or did you just abandon her in this house and leave her to die?*

Elaine didn't know that Lucille had tried to help. For years and years. Lucille was the eldest daughter who tried to pull what was left of their family together. Every year she invited Mā to holidays; to recitals; to family vacations. Mā never showed up. Not even for Madeline, her granddaughter, who used to ask about her all the time. Each time Lucille called, Mā would say she was fine out here by herself. Whenever they visited the house, Mā hurried them out. When Lucille hired her a nurse, Mā fired her. Mā exiled herself here, in this house that they had all grown up in, and that they were now severed from.

Reid hadn't even been able to look her in the eye this morning when he read the terms of the will. He knew something was wrong, too. Lucille stood and her chair scraped behind her, rattling across the floor. She picked up the business card that Reid had left behind on the table. His name was printed in spare font. There was an office number and a mobile.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she started a text message.

This is Lucille. I need some clarification
on the will. Can we talk?

Her fingers hovered over the send button. It was too easy to reach out to him like this. She remembered when she used to stare at the phone in the library and try to guess the precise moment Reid would call. Was this a good idea? She was still smarting from her conversation with Daniel. But she'd reached out to her ex-husband out of vulnerability. This was a necessity. She needed more details from Reid. He was one of the last people her mother had communicated with.

Lucille sent the text and set her phone face down on the table. She looked around the room. Certain parts had kept well. The table