



THE
WHITE
ROOM

 QREADS

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When Andy rang the doorbell, the door opened immediately. “Marcus Chiang?” Andy asked.

The man in the doorway looked him up and down. He had a square face and thick eyebrows. His mouth was a thin line drawn across his face. He gave Andy the slightest of nods and opened the door a little wider.

Andy lifted his toolbox and stepped inside. “Andy Yeung,” he said, smiling and sticking out his hand.

Marcus ignored the hand. “This way,” he said, walking down a wide hallway.

Andy raised an eyebrow and followed Marcus through the apartment. The rooms were large, empty, and silent. There were tables and chairs of polished, dark wood, tall vases on pedestals, and elaborate paintings

wider than his arms could stretch. Andy felt like he was in a museum.

“Big place you’ve got here, Marcus,” Andy remarked.

Marcus turned to face him. “Call me Mr. Chiang,” he said coldly.

Andy thought of something else he’d like to call him, but kept his mouth shut. He needed the money.

The bedroom had a king-sized bed and two big bay windows.

“Here,” said Marcus, stopping in front of the windows.

Frowning, Andy bent over to take a closer look. The wood was gray and cracked from water damage. He pushed his thumbnail into a windowsill. The texture of the wood was like a sponge.

“You’ve got a lot of water damage here. I’d have to take out both windows and replace them,” Andy said.

He expected Marcus to ask how much it would cost, but he didn’t. “How long will that take?” he said.

Andy said, “Two weeks—unless you want me to get another guy in to help.”

“No,” Marcus said shortly.

“At least it’s spring,” Andy said. “So you won’t have a lot of stormy weather blowing in. And I’ll be careful not to inconvenience your family too much—”

“I live alone,” said Marcus.

“Oh, I just assumed—” Andy said, glancing at the wide bed.

“My wife died two years ago,” said Marcus.

“I’m sorry,” Andy said, noticing that Marcus didn’t look very sorry.

“Do you listen to the radio while you work?” Marcus asked.

“Sometimes—if there’s a ballgame on,” Andy replied.

“You can listen to the radio. I’ll bring one in,” said Marcus.

“Okay,” Andy said. Something in Marcus’s face told him not to ask why.



Most important thing,” Marcus said, “—you stay in *this room*. No other rooms! You eat lunch here and don’t leave until I get home.” He stared hard at Andy, as if expecting him to protest.

Andy’s neck burned, but he nodded. It was clear he’d lose the job if he didn’t go along with Marcus’s rules.

When Andy arrived the next morning, Marcus had already set up a radio and turned it up loud. Andy switched it off as soon as the man left for work. Then he strolled around the apartment, poking into every room. He’d never done this on a job—but until now, no one ordered him to stay in one room.

There was the kitchen, large and spotless, and the formal dining room, with six chairs lined up as straight as soldiers at the gleaming dark table. The living room had stiff-looking chairs and a couch. The bed in the bedroom was as neatly made as one

in a hotel room. There were no magazines, no clothes draped over chairs, and no stray mugs or plates around the TV. It wasn't at all like Andy's apartment.

The door next to the bedroom was locked. Andy jiggled the door handle, shrugged, and started to work.

He took a crowbar and started prying the rotten wood away from the wall. The window was redwood. It had once been beautiful. He wondered why Marcus, with his magazine-perfect apartment, had let his windows become ruined.

Around noon, he stopped and ate a sandwich. It was so quiet he could hear himself chew. Eight stories below, the city traffic was a quiet hum. Twice he heard the distant slam of a door in another apartment. That was all.

He went back to work, carefully lifting glass from the rotted sashes, when suddenly the back of his neck prickled. He turned around quickly, scanning the empty room. He'd been sure that someone

was watching him!

A while later, Andy again got the feeling that he was being watched. He spun around in time to see the “locked” door move from slightly open to closed. He walked over and tapped on it.

“Who’s there?” he asked loudly. “What’s going on?”

He stopped and listened—but the dead silence of the apartment fell around him like a blanket. Now he wondered if he’d been imagining things. He shook his head and went back to the windows. Finding a rock station on the radio, he turned it up loud. The place was just *too* quiet.

At 5:30 sharp, Marcus Chiang came home and inspected Andy’s work. He brushed a piece of lint off his expensive suit and gave a slight nod. Andy got the impression that the work he’d done wasn’t great—but it would have to do. Andy had intended to ask him about the locked room. But as he looked at Marcus’s tight face, he changed his mind. He left, happy

to get back to the noise and color of the bustling streets.



Andy had no time to go home. He bought a sandwich, which he ate while waiting for the streetcar out to City College. That night he had a quiz in anatomy and an endless lab session in physiology to look forward to.

It was almost 10:00 when he got to his basement apartment. It smelled heavily of pizza. His roommate, Wes, had taken over the living room. He and three of his friends were playing video games. Andy closed the door to his room, stuffed cotton in his ears, and studied until 1:00 in the morning.

The next morning, he overslept. “Seven minutes late,” Marcus scolded with an accusing glare.

“Sorry,” Andy muttered, seeing that *no* excuse would be accepted.

When Marcus left, Andy quickly set to work. He wanted this job finished.

“Seven minutes late,” he muttered between his teeth. Then he carelessly jerked a pane of glass from the sash bar. When it shattered, his hand was lined with red streaks. *“Auuuugh!”* he yelled, doubling over in pain.



Soft footsteps pattered up behind him. He caught a glimpse of a young woman’s face. But then she bent over his hand and her black hair hid her face.

She wrapped his hand in a towel and pressed it against his stomach. The strength of her fingers surprised him. “Hold it still,” she said. Then she ran to the bathroom, her bare feet almost soundless on the floor.

In a flash she returned with a first-aid kit. Once more she bent over the hand, swabbing the cuts with antiseptic. He looked away, feeling sick and weak.

“The little finger’s been hurt the worst,” she murmured. “You’re probably going to need some stitches.”