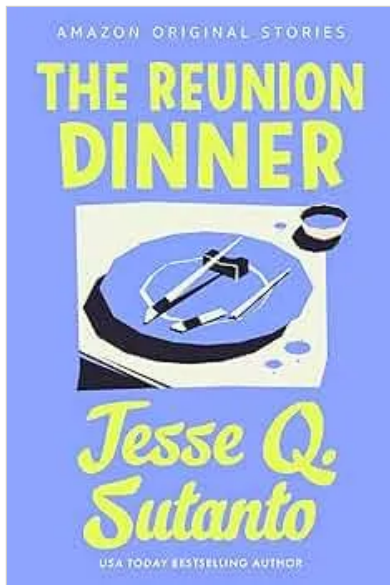




The Reunion Dinner

(Busybodies collection)

Author: *Jesse Q Sutanto*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A family reunion turns deliciously sinister when a murder threatens to spoil one mother's big night in this short story from USA Today bestselling author Jesse Q. Sutanto.

Josephine Ying longs to overthrow Big Uncle as the best host, and after his roast duck incident, she's finally getting her chance this Chinese New Year. Even better, her son is bringing a surprise. Unfortunately, the surprise turns out to be a gold-digging fiancée—who dies at the dinner table. Her problems just got a lot bigger than hosting the perfect meal. Certain there's a killer at the table, Josephine sharpens her questions to find them out.

Jesse Q. Sutanto's *The Reunion Dinner* is part of *Busybodies*, a collection of quirky mysteries featuring amateur gumshoes who stumble upon peculiar cases. Calling all snoops! Read or listen to each arresting story in a single sitting.

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It was to be a night to remember. Josephine Ying would make sure of it. She'd spent the last month planning tonight's celebration, down to the smallest detail. After tonight, nobody could say anything silly, like "Let's have next year's Chinese New Year dinner at Big Uncle's house!" Oh no, after tonight, it would be a foregone conclusion that every CNY dinner should always be held at Josephine's house, because no one could possibly top Josephine's hosting skills. Thank goodness for Big Uncle's fall; otherwise they'd have had yet another year spent at his place, choking down roast pork that was as dry as shoe leather. Well, maybe not thank goodness; she shouldn't think such thoughts, really. But she was a teensy bit thankful. And anyway, the fall wasn't even close to being fatal; so Liuyi needed a new hip, that was hardly anything dire, was it?

"Do you think," Adam, Josephine's husband, said as he and Josephine staggered into the kitchen under the weight of a whole roast pig, "that perhaps you might've gone a bit overboard?"

Josephine grunted. Adam was an Englishman, and even after decades of CNY celebrations, it still hadn't sunk in just how important it was to go all out for the big reunion dinner. Not to mention this was her first chance in, well, ever to host the dinner. There was no such thing as going overboard. Only after they heaved the pig onto the kitchen counter did she manage to catch enough of a breath to give a retort. "Everyone traveling from all over the country to come to dinner," she huffed.

"I know, it's just—well, Liuyi never had a whole roast pig when he hosted."

"Pah, that is why all these years I keep saying, 'Why not take turn hosting? Why always at Big Uncle's house?' Now they will see what they have been missing all

these years.”

Adam smiled and squeezed her shoulders. “That’s true. I don’t see how anyone could possibly go back to slumming it at Liuyi’s after this feast.”

Josephine bit back a smug grin. She couldn’t wait to see everybody’s faces when they arrived to find the spread she’d worked her ass off all morning and most of yesterday to make. Not to mention the fact that her son, Keith, had said he was bringing back to LA a “fabulous surprise.” Josephine rather hoped the surprise would be something from Tiffany’s. It wasn’t too big a leap to hope for, since Keith worked on Wall Street, and the flagship Tiffany’s store was like, right there. Josephine could just see it: Keith walking to the office in the morning, spotting the iconic aquamarine flag, and thinking to himself, Aha, I know just what to get my wonderful, long-suffering mother for Chinese New Year! Perhaps a necklace, or a bracelet? She’d settle for a handbag as well; she wasn’t picky.

The guests started arriving at around 1:00 p.m., each one bringing with them armloads of food. Yolanda, Josephine’s younger sister, brought some fried New Year cake, and her daughter, Francine, brought two bottles of whiskey.

“Fran,” Adam scolded in a jokey sort of voice, “are you trying to get your family wasted?”

“Always,” Fran said, giving them a hug and saying “Happy New Year” before breezing into the kitchen. “I’ll make the cocktails, shall I?”

“I’ll help!” another cousin called out, but Fran waved her away.

“That’s okay, Janie, I can manage. I’ve been looking up the best cocktail recipes.”

Yolanda looked after her daughter’s retreating back, shaking her head and sighing.

Josephine took the dish of fried nian gao from her and wrapped one arm around Yolanda's thin shoulders. "How you two holding up?"

"I'm ..." Yolanda tilted her head to one side, pausing, then said, as though surprised herself, "You know what? Considering what happened with that no-good scumbag, I'm doing well, actually. Much better now that I've had some time to adjust to being a divorcée. Fran's still struggling a little, though."

Josephine leaned back, giving her sister a closer look. Yolanda was ten years younger than her, but everyone always said that Josephine looked more youthful. But now, gazing at Yolanda, it struck Josephine that her little sister really did look like she was doing well. Her skin was glowing, her hair was glossy, and even her outfit was banging. Describing things as banging was a new favorite of Josephine's, since she'd heard her nephew Porter use the word to describe one of her home-cooked meals. Speaking of Porter, she was about to ask Yolanda to elaborate more on how well her life was going when the doorbell rang once more and Porter's voice called out, "Yooo fam! The life of the party is here!"

Yolanda rolled her eyes and smiled fondly, and Josephine laughed and hurried to open the door. Porter was the life of the party; he was always a good-natured kid, eager to make everyone laugh at family gatherings, and Josephine had a soft spot for him in her heart.

"Auntie Josie! Happy Lunar New Year!" Porter said, and gave her a bear hug. Behind him, his parents wished Josephine a happy New Year. They'd brought with them a huge basket of oranges as well as a roast Peking duck. Josephine ushered them in.

"Hey, cuz," Francine called out. "Come help me hand out the cocktails."

"Dang, starting early, okay," Porter said as he went into the kitchen. "I do not hate it. Though I hope this has nothing to do with the asshole who broke your heart months

ago? Wait, was that months ago, or was it last year?”

Porter wasn't known for his subtlety, and for once, Josephine was grateful for his naturally loud voice as she eavesdropped on their conversation.

“Mind your own business, cuz,” Fran said, but her voice didn't have much bite to it. She sighed. “I'll tell you when I feel ready. Which won't be for another few years at least.”

Josephine smiled at an in-law as she strained to listen to more of Fran and Porter's conversation. She was somewhat taken aback to hear about Fran's heartbreak. Fran had always been a toughie. Even when she was little and skinned her knees playing outside, she hadn't so much as shed a tear. Josephine felt a stab of annoyance toward Fran's ex, someone who had managed to get beneath that tough exterior only to proceed to hurt Fran.

“Anyway, what about you? How's it going with your business partner, Lacey?” Fran said, and was Josephine imagining things or was there a slight edge to Fran's voice?

There was an awkward pause; then Porter's voice, sounding falsely jovial, said, “Come on, it's reunion dinner. Let's not talk business.”

Josephine frowned. Porter was always talking about his start-up. For him to avoid the chance to crow about his business was strange, to say the least.

But Josephine didn't have a chance to bust in and ask why the two of them were behaving so strangely, because more and more family members arrived, and soon the house was filled to the gills with guests and the warm sounds of their merry conversation and laughter. Josephine sipped at her whiskey sour and gazed at the group with a soft smile. This, this was what she'd always wanted, had dreamed of, even, and it hadn't happened until she was in her sixties thanks to her big brother

always insisting that reunion dinners be held at his place. But see how good a time everyone was having.

“You’re gloating,” Adam said.

“I’m just standing here not saying anything,” she snapped back, but she couldn’t hide the smug smile from him. Then she glanced at her watch and frowned. “I wonder where Keith is.”

As though only just remembering their son, Adam checked his phone. “Huh, he’s a bit late, isn’t he? His flight should’ve arrived a couple hours ago.”

“Traffic on the 405, probably,” Porter said, popping up from behind them.

Josephine wondered if she should text Keith to ask if there was indeed traffic on the 405, but what if he was driving? Had he said whether he would be driving or taking an Uber here? She couldn’t remember.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Adam said, taking another sip of his drink. His cheeks were rosy from the alcohol. In fact, as Josephine surveyed the room, everyone’s faces were pink from the alcohol.

“Aiya, you all better slow down with the drink,” she scolded without any bite.

“We’re fine, Auntie,” Porter said.

“Yeah, it’s Lunar New Year, a time for celebration,” Francine said. She clinked glasses with Porter. “You need to drink more, Auntie, you’re not even slightly pink yet.”

Josephine merely tutted at them before heading into the kitchen to finish up the last of

the cooking. For the next couple of hours or so, she, Yolanda, and two other aunties stayed in the kitchen, frying, boiling, and steaming various dishes. They were accustomed to working together in one kitchen, and the atmosphere of cheerful controlled chaos made the time fly. Cooking as one big group was something they always did for the reunion dinner, something that Josephine had used to her advantage the year before. She would never admit this to anyone, not even to Adam, but last year, sick of Big Uncle boasting about his famous roast duck, she'd turned the timer back an extra twenty minutes when no one was looking. The duck had come out so dry it was like gnawing on a piece of plywood, so hard and fibrous that Second Aunt had lost a crown trying to chew it. It had done Big Uncle a world of good to be taken down a peg or two. She'd done him a favor, really.

When the last dish was finally done, Josephine realized it was 6:00 p.m. Dinnertime. She bustled out of the kitchen, wondering why Keith hadn't come in to say hi to her, but when she scanned the roomful of people, she found to her consternation that Keith still wasn't there.

"Keith is not here?" she said to Adam as she heaved a huge pot of pork rib soup onto the table.

Adam shook his head. "I've tried calling him several times, but he's not answering his phone."

Fear stabbed cold and sharp in Josephine's belly as scenarios flooded her mind, each one more horrific than the last. Keith lying mangled in a catastrophic car wreck. Keith lying in a pool of blood after a mugging. Keith—

Seeing the horrified expression on her face, Adam hurriedly said, "I'm sure he's fine. There must be a good explanation for it. I'm guessing he just got carried away with his work. You know how he is."

“Yeah, he’s been a tough guy to pin down lately,” Francine said.

“Yup, he’s missed the last four poker games,” Porter said. “Ben’s threatening to kick him out of the group.”

Ben, another nephew, shrugged and mumbled, “I mean, if he’s always going to flake, what’s the point?”

Francine and Porter had lived in New York City up until the previous year, when they both moved back to LA, and Josephine was glad that even after their move, the cousins had kept up their weekly poker nights, doing them over Zoom.

After sending over a couple of texts along the lines of Where are you, Keith? Why you not call anyone to tell us you are going to be late? You trying to drive me to early grave? You call me now! Josephine ushered everyone to the table, which was positively groaning under the weight of all the food.

“No point letting everything get cold,” she said. “Come, we start the yu sheng.” She handed extra-long pairs of chopsticks to everyone, and they gathered around the table and started mixing the Chinese New Year fish salad, chanting good wishes for the year ahead. She tried to keep up her smile even as her heart grew heavier with every minute that passed without Keith there. Keith wasn’t a fan of the taste of yu sheng but loved the act of mixing it. When he was a little kid, he’d squeal with laughter every time they mixed the salad with everyone. Without him here, Josephine could barely taste the sweet, savory dish. The food might as well be ash. She picked at it listlessly as everyone around her tucked in and raved about how delicious everything was.

“It’ll be okay,” Adam whispered to her, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

“Do you think we should call police?” she said. Another hour had passed and still no Keith.

Adam chewed on his lip. “And say what, exactly? That our adult son hasn’t shown up to reunion dinner? I don’t know ...”

“But something must have happen,” she said. Her voice was rising, and she was vaguely aware that around the table, conversations were halting and chopsticks were being lowered as people turned to stare at her, but she didn’t care. This was so unlike Keith, and no one knew her son as well as she did. Something was wrong. She was about to fetch her phone to make a 911 call when the front door opened.

“Ma? Ba?”

“Keith!” she practically shrieked, leaping from the table and rushing to the foyer. There were murmurs of relief, and people followed behind her.

“Happy Lunar New Year, Ma. Sorry we’re so late,” he said.

Josephine wrapped her arms around him and squeezed tight. She closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar scent of her only child, letting all the anxiety melt away as she held him.

“Your mom was worried sick,” Adam said, hugging them both.

Belatedly, Josephine’s brain picked out something Keith had said. We, he’d said. We ?

“Lacey insisted on getting something for you guys, and we kind of got carried away ...”

Josephine’s eyes flew open, and she released Keith. He gave her a boyish smile that reminded her of how he used to look at age five, then pushed the door open all the way, revealing a beautiful young woman.

“Ma, Ba, remember how I said I had a surprise?”

Images of a glamorous diamond bracelet from Tiffany’s evaporated as Josephine stared at the girl before her.

“Well, I’d like you to meet Lacey,” Keith said.

“Ah, Lacey, hello—” Josephine said.

“My fiancée,” Keith finished.

Whatever Josephine was about to say turned to dust in her mouth. For a second, all she and Adam could do was stare, open mouthed, at their son and the girl he had his arm around. Adam recovered first. “Oh!” he said. “Wow. What—ah, what wonderful news! Congratulations, son, I’m happy for you.”

Is he? Josephine thought. Why is he happy for Keith? We know nothing about this woman! Somehow, though, she managed to wrestle a smile onto her face, though it fought her the entire way. She could practically feel her cheeks cracking as she forced her mouth to stretch.

“Mama, Baba,” Lacey said, and before Josephine knew it, she was enveloped in a hug that filled her nose with a sickeningly sweet perfume. Had this stranger just called her Mama ?

Josephine placed her arms around the stranger and patted her back gingerly before stepping away. Not a stranger, her mind scolded her. Your future daughter-in-law, Lacey. She tried for another smile, but it felt more like a grimace. “Nice to meeting you,” she said, emphasis on meet , to hopefully remind Keith how ridiculous this entire situation was.

“I got you a present,” Lacey said, and handed Josephine a surprisingly heavy box.

“Bird’s nest,” Keith said. “It’s why we were late. Lacey insisted on going to San Gabriel to get it for you.”

“Oh” was all Josephine managed to say. Why drive all the way to SGV for this? she wanted to snap. You can just order on Amazon. What a pretentious gesture, and not to mention an inconvenient one. “Thank you,” she said, and, afraid that Lacey was going to ambush her with yet another hug, Josephine turned to go into the living room.

Instead, she found the larger family behind her, staring at the scene with unabashed curiosity. Yolanda’s, Francine’s, and Porter’s eyes were comically huge, and to Josephine’s bemusement, they looked even more horrified than she was feeling. Well, at least she wasn’t alone in feeling sideswiped by Lacey’s appearance.

Belatedly, Josephine recalled the mention of Porter’s business partner, Lacey. Surely it wasn’t the same Lacey? But the look on Porter’s face confirmed it. Lacey the fiancée was the same person as Lacey the business partner, and from Porter’s expression, he didn’t look happy about seeing Lacey here at the reunion dinner.

Then Francine opened her mouth and said, “What the fuck?”

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“Fran,” Porter said, tugging on her sleeve. “Come on.”

The room fell completely silent. Lacey grimaced and said, “Hey, Francine. Hey, Porter.”

Porter didn’t reply, which was very unlike him. He was usually like a golden retriever, his entire being filled with unbounded joy.

Francine snorted. “Don’t ‘Hey, Francine’ me, you—you—what are you doing here?”

Lacey shrugged. “I’m with Keith. I’m his fiancée.” She lifted her hand to show a diamond the size of a cough drop.

Josephine felt faint. She’d given Keith Nainai’s old ring, a family heirloom, and he’d promised that when he found the right woman, he’d propose to her with it. This monstrosity on Lacey’s finger was definitely not Nainai’s ring. But never mind Nainai’s ring, she told herself. What in the world was going on with Francine?

Keith cleared his throat. “Maybe we can have a chat outside, Fran? In private?”

“I have nothing to say to this conniving bitch,” Francine said.

A few people gasped audibly.

“Oh, come on, Fran,” Lacey said. “We don’t have to resort to childish name-calling.”

“Childish name-call—let me at this bitch.”

Before Josephine knew it, her sweet, nerdy niece Francine was lunging forward, a determined look on her face. Luckily, several other family members were possessed of faster reaction times and pounced on Francine before she reached Lacey.

“Whoa, whoa,” someone said. “I think she’s had one too many whiskey sours.”

Josephine nodded, but it was clear to her that whatever was going on with Francine had a lot more involved than just plain alcohol. The crowd ushered Francine into the dining room, leaving Josephine, Adam, Keith, and Lacey in the foyer. For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Keith said, “Well, xin nian kuai le!”

Well, it was the New Year. The tension broke, and Adam clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Come on in, you two. Let’s get you fed.”

It was impossible not to find your eyes glued to Lacey. There was something about her that drew one’s attention inexorably toward her, like she was a rare flower that was about to bloom for the first and only time. Or like she was a car wreck, Josephine thought as she watched Lacey interacting with everyone for the next couple of hours.

Lacey was a beautiful girl, a stunner, really. She was tall and slender and had the natural grace of a dancer, and her eyes were doe-like and her skin had that springy, collagen-rich shine that everyone longed for. But more than her outward beauty, she had a certain quality about her that naturally drew the eye. Some might call it a certain *je ne sais quoi*; others might call it X factor. Whatever it was, Lacey had it in droves, and Josephine did not approve.

And that was the crux of the problem, wasn’t it? Because Josephine had prided herself on being the anti-tiger mom. She was always so painfully aware of every Asian stereotype, and so careful to avoid being any of them. She’d never once even

suggested to Keith that he might like to pursue medicine or law or engineering as a career, no! It had simply been a happy happenstance that Keith wanted to go into finance. If he'd chosen a career in the arts, Josephine would've stepped aside and let him. No, really, she would've. And so, naturally, Josephine had always seen herself as a gracious future mother-in-law, one that her daughter-in-law would rave about to her friends.

"I don't know how I got so lucky!" her future daughter-in-law would say. "She's so cool and so hip, and she's basically the mom I always wished for!"

But now here Josephine was, studying her future daughter-in-law like she was a germ under a microscope. A particularly hairy, unpleasant germ that she would love to douse in alcohol and watch shrivel up. She wasn't this person. It was just something about Lacey, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Something was off about her. She needed to speak to Francine. But poor Francine had been sequestered in a corner of the living room, well away from Lacey—and everyone else, for that matter—and another niece was keeping watch right next to her, plying her with roast Peking duck and reassuring arm pats.

Josephine narrowed her eyes at Lacey. She was certainly good at making a stir. She was like a wooden spoon and the entire roomful of people a thick batter she was mixing. Josephine did not miss how Lacey changed the entire makeup of the room, how everyone, including Keith, gravitated toward her like she was the moon and they were the ocean. She noted, with dismay, the cruel way that Lacey joked, always ready with someone as the butt of her jokes and anecdotes, and how she always had a long-nailed hand resting on Keith's arm. Dear lord, Josephine thought, there could not be a worse daughter-in-law to be had. An obvious delinquent she could deal with. But this? A devious charmer? Disaster.

"Are you all right?" Yolanda said to her in Mandarin, and Josephine nodded. She was quite shaken, but she put up a good front.

“Well, it’s quite a surprise from Keith,” she murmured.

“Yes, it is,” Yolanda said. “I know all about nasty surprises.” She was glaring at Lacey as she said this, and the venom in her voice took Josephine aback.

Josephine chewed her lip. Yolanda and her husband, George, had filed for divorce about a year ago, and though Josephine ached to ask what the reason was for the split, she was too well mannered to be so forward. She trusted that their sisterly bond made it clear that she was always there if Yolanda ever needed a listening ear. But the truth was, here she was almost a year later and still none the wiser. She should ask Yolanda, she really should, but her attention was caught by Lacey, who was placing her hands on Keith in such a way that made Josephine’s skin crawl.

I should get the desserts ready, she thought weakly. She tried not to think of the way Lacey’s long fingernails had pressed into Keith’s arms. The same arms that she, Josephine, had moisturized so gently many years ago, so religiously, because Keith had eczema and she’d read that daily moisturizing was key in keeping it away.

As Josephine lurked in the kitchen, fussing unnecessarily with the steamer, a piercing scream rent the air. She was so deeply embedded in her stubborn own world, her insistence that everything would turn out okay, that it took someone to grab her shoulder to shake her out of it. She snapped to attention. “What is it?” she warbled helplessly.

“I don’t know. Come.”

She galloped out of the kitchen and into the dining room. A crowd had formed there, a circle like a whirlpool, with a silent center. And right there in the very middle of the chaos, still as a stone, was the rapidly cooling body of Lacey.

“Everybody stay calm!” Josephine cried. She cleared her throat and reminded herself

not to sound so shrill. She tried again, in a more somber voice this time. “Everyone, it’ll be okay.”

“Oh my god,” Keith sobbed, shaking Lacey in his arms. “She’s dead. She’s dead!”

“Oh, my dear boy—” Josephine began, but she had no idea what else she could say beyond that. It was clear that whatever Lacey was, she was also very much dead. Her eyes were open, for one, staring glassily at nothing. There was foam at the corners of her mouth.

“Poison,” someone in the crowd cried out, and a few people gasped.

Josephine’s stomach twisted, and she almost dry heaved.

“I’ve called 911,” someone else shouted.

Within minutes, sirens filled the air, and there was a heavy knock on the door. Adam went to open it, and everyone scattered as paramedics flooded into the house. Aiya, Josephine thought faintly, they are wearing their shoes in the house! But she managed to stop herself from asking them to take their shoes off. She watched, helpless, as these tall strangers tromped all over her lovely home and heaved Lacey’s lifeless form onto a stretcher. Then, all too soon, Lacey was gone, and the paramedics were replaced by police officers, who were so much worse than paramedics. They strode around like they owned the place, asking people impossible questions.

Among the horrified cries and occasional sobs, Josephine caught suspicious murmurs about what could have poisoned Lacey when everyone else had had all the same food. “It must have been put in her drink. Someone was targeting her.”

She looked over at Keith, and to her horror, the officer questioning him was staring at him with such a pointed look that she immediately went up to them.

“—your relationship been rocky lately?” the officer was saying.

Oh god. What was going on? “It’s always the boyfriend or the husband,” wasn’t that a thing they said? But how could anyone look upon this tragic scene and suspect Keith? Then again, if they were used to pinning it on the boyfriend or husband, how could they look upon this scene and see any other suspect but Keith? After all, no one even knew who Lacey was.

No one, that was, except for Francine.

Right. That was it! That was who Josephine had to question. After all, it was Francine who’d been plying everyone with whiskey sours all night, and like Cousin Todd pointed out, it must’ve been put in her drink.

“Eh, you don’t talk to my son without his lawyer present,” Josephine snapped.

They all stared at her. Keith, who was in tears, said, “I—I’d only proposed two days ago! We were talking about the wedding, and—and she wanted to go to Phuket for our honeymoon, and I said I wanted to go to Santorini, and—everything was going so well, and—”

Stop talking, Josephine wanted to shout at him. But there was no use. She had to go talk to Francine. She scanned the room for her. It took a while for her to spot her; the girl was in a dark corner of the room, clutching her glass with shaking hands.

Taking a deep breath, Josephine walked over to her. She laid a gentle hand on Francine’s arm, and Francine’s entire body jerked and stiffened, as though she hadn’t noticed Josephine approaching her.

“Fran, come talk to Auntie,” Josephine said softly.

Fran's eyes were wild, but she nodded and abruptly stalked off into the den. She whirled round once they were in there and blurted out, "Is she really dead?"

Josephine nodded, and a sound that was half sob, half shrill laugh burbled out of Fran's mouth. What should she say next? Did you have anything to do with it? seemed a tad direct and would most likely offend her. Aiya, this sort of thing had never been Josephine's forte. She was always direct, throwing out statements that could never be misinterpreted, like bullets. She would have to channel her inner Adam. How would Adam handle such a situation? Ah, yes. Reaching out, she patted Francine's shoulder gingerly. "Are you all right?" It was obvious that she wasn't, but this was the thing people liked to say in these situations.

Fran shook her head and made that really awkward sound again, the sound that was something between crying and laughing. It made Josephine uncomfortable, but she forged ahead anyway.

"What happen between you and Lacey? In past, I mean. You are so angry when you see her, why?" She hoped that wasn't too forward to ask.

Fran uttered a sigh that was way too long-suffering for someone her age. "God, I don't even know where to begin."

"The two of you ... I sense that maybe there is some romance there?" When Fran turned sixteen, she'd announced to the larger family that she was pansexual. This did not, as she later explained to Josephine, mean that she was attracted to pans but rather that she was attracted to people regardless of their gender.

Fran nodded, not meeting Josephine's eye. "It was more than just something . She was my—I was—we connected on a different level. She called me her soulmate. It really felt like I'd finally met the person I was supposed to meet all along, you know? It was beyond special. She was always touching me—not in a sexual way, Auntie, but

like when we walked, for example, she'd give my ponytail a little tug, or slide her hand up and down my back, or twine her arm around mine ... it was like we were two pieces of a single unit and she couldn't bear to not be connected to me. We even got matching tattoos!" She lifted her sleeve to reveal a small tattoo on the underside of her arm that said S-O . "Hers says U-L ," Fran said dully. Tears shimmered in her eyes. "Cheesy as hell, I know, but we were in love. Or at least, I was."

"And Lacey, she cheat on you?" Josephine ventured a guess. From the way Fran's expression contorted, Josephine knew she'd hit the nail on the head. A jilted lover. People had been murdered for much less than that.

"She didn't just cheat on me, she—"

"Fran!"

Josephine stiffened with guilt at the sound of Yolanda's voice. She straightened up, taking a step away from Francine as Yolanda marched into the room. Josephine could barely look Yolanda in the eye. Even from where she stood, she could feel Yolanda's anger radiating from her. Yolanda must know what Josephine had been up to. Guilt shriveled Josephine's insides. She wished she could explain to Yolanda, but then what explanation could she possibly give for questioning Yolanda's daughter in private? That she was trying to pin the blame on Francine so that Keith would be off the hook? In the end, Josephine said nothing.

"Come on, Francine," Yolanda said tersely, putting an arm around Fran's shoulders and leading her out of the den, away from Josephine. As they walked past Josephine, Yolanda shot her a look and said, "Why don't you talk to Porter instead? He's the one who was running a whole company with Lacey."

Of course. Yolanda was right, as usual.

Josephine strode out of the den, her chest puffed with indignation. Like a torpedo, she locked her eyesight on Porter and marched toward him. People scattered out of the way, and Porter, sensing a disturbance in the air, looked up. “Uh,” he managed to say before Josephine grabbed his arm and said, “You come with me now.”

This time, she led Porter to the kitchen instead of the den. Porter was a simple soul who was motivated by food. Once they were inside, Josephine plopped a barbecued pork bun into his hand and said, “We talk now. You eat this.”

Porter looked at the bun and gulped audibly. “Um, I don’t know, Auntie. I mean, Lacey’s literally dead from poisoning—”

Josephine’s eyebrows rose until they threatened to disappear into her hairline. “Are you calling my food poison?”

“Wha—no, no! I just, I mean, we don’t know what it was that poisoned her ...”

“Oh, this is big accusation, you are saying I am such a bad cook I poison my guest—”

“No, Auntie, that’s not what I—you know what, I’ll eat it. See? Mmm.” Porter looked like he was about to cry as he chewed the mouthful of pork bun. When he finally swallowed, they both looked at each other for a long moment, as though expecting him to drop dead then and there. The moment passed, and they both let out a long breath.

“Porter, Lacey was business partner?”

Porter nodded, a forlorn look on his face. “Yeah. We met in college. We’d been friends for years before we decided to do the start-up together. I introduced her to everyone—Fran, Keith, the rest of my friends and family.

“I thought she and I worked well together, but then she basically swindled me out of my own company, so that was that.”

“What? How?”

“I got a bit careless. She’d give me these forms to sign and tell me they were lease renewals for our office space or insurance forms and all that boring crap, and I ...” Porter’s gaze met hers, and he looked like such a sad little boy that Josephine wanted to reach out and hug him. “I never read them. I hate legalese. I just signed whatever she handed me. And one of the things I signed over was my own shares of the company.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Stupid, right? There was no highly cunning plan, no high-stakes anything. I literally signed my company away. It’s my own fault.”

Josephine’s heart went out to him. “Oh, no, no. You silly boy. Is not your fault.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Well, you are very careless, yes. And if Keith do that, I throw my sandal at him, but don’t forget, the real villain is Lacey. How she can do that to you? That is a very bad person, to do that to own partner.”

“I’m actually in the process of suing Lacey for my rightful share of the company. I’ve hired a lawyer, and ... yeah. Anyway, it’s messy. I didn’t know she was seeing Keith. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought her into my circle. I had no idea she was going to work through our family like a virus, infecting one person after another. It’s all my fault.”

“No, silly boy, not your fault,” Josephine muttered.

Porter’s mouth quirked into a small smile. “Thanks, Auntie. You know, you’ve always been my favorite aunt. Don’t tell Auntie Yolanda, though.”

It felt as though there was a knife stabbing into Josephine's gut. She made herself smile even as she thought, A betrayed business partner, that's good motivation for killing someone, isn't it?

And now that she had two extremely viable reasons for two different people to want to kill Lacey, she could simply go to one of the officers still tromping around her house and tell them that Keith was innocent. But Josephine found that her legs did not want to move. Her entire body fought her all the way out of the kitchen. She stood in the doorway, looking at the chaotic scene in front of her. Many of her guests had left, and she realized with a pang of sadness that this would likely be the last time she hosted the reunion dinner. Then she scolded herself for having such a frivolous, silly thought. She had to focus on the important stuff. Stuff like proving her son's innocence.

But was she really going to do it by betraying her niece and nephew? She wrung her hands and chewed on the inside of her cheek. She couldn't. No, she could not leave them to the wolves like that. She'd never be able to forgive herself.

"Ma'am," an officer said, startling her.

"Yes?"

"You are the homeowner?" the officer, a woman with very pale blue eyes, said.

"Yes?"

The officer frowned. "Yes or no?"

"Oh, I mean yes. Yes, I am. With my husband, Adam."

"Right, we've spoken to him. I need to ask you a few questions."

Was she now under suspicion? She almost laughed at the thought. Her, a middle-aged Chinese mother, suspected of murder? Ridiculous.

But obviously the officer did not share her sentiment, because she drilled Josephine with unrelenting questions. Had she cooked everything? Where did every ingredient come from? Who else handled the food? Who handled what, exactly? She couldn't remember? How could she possibly not remember? What about the drinks? Francine brought the whiskey? What about the mixers? What about the ice cubes? Did she have a good relationship with Lacey? First time they met? And Lacey was engaged to her son already? Wasn't that weird? Did that upset her?

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Yes, yes, of course it is weird, and yes, of course it upset me, what do you think, you tiresome thing? Josephine wanted to shout. But she wasn't really the type to shout. She was the type to keep her head down and obey the law, and so she stood there, answering each question as best as she could.

It felt like forever before the officer was satisfied by Josephine's answers. "We'll be in touch," she said, and left to find another victim to annoy.

Josephine wondered where Keith was. Why wasn't he here? Had he left? Fear coursed through her veins. Had the police taken him in for further questioning? She found Adam. He was staring at the half-eaten feast on the dining table with a thoughtful expression.

"Where is Keith?" she said.

Adam looked up. "Keith? I don't know." He peered around the room as though in a daze.

"How you cannot know where you own son is?" Josephine snapped.

He gaped at her, and she wanted to shake him and ask how he could be so calm at this time. Then it hit her that Adam, good-natured Adam, did not realize that his own son was probably the number one suspect in this case. Or maybe he was in shock. But they didn't have the luxury of staying in shock, she wanted to snap at him. They couldn't afford to stand here in a daze and let the cops home in on Keith. But the thought of telling Adam that Keith might be a suspect was unbearable. Of the two of them, Josephine had always been the problem solver, the one who made the

impossible decisions when they had to. Like that one time years ago when they ran over a coyote on the I-5. They'd gotten out of the car and found, to their dismay, that the poor animal was still alive. It was Josephine who'd taken a rock to it to end its suffering. Adam had dry heaved on the side. Afterward, she'd doused her hands with hand sanitizer, and they hadn't spoken about it since.

No, she couldn't bring herself to dump the burden of proving Keith's innocence on Adam, so in the end, all she said was "I worry about him. His fiancée just die in front of him."

Adam's face softened. "Yes, of course. You're right. We should find him."

"You go up to his room," she said. "I will look around on this floor."

With that, Josephine went through the living room, now in a horrible mess that would take her at least two days to clean, the den, the dining room, and the sewing room. No Keith in sight, but then raised voices from the backyard caught her attention. One of them sounded male. Keith? She jumped up and ran to the den, where there was a sliding door that led out to the swimming pool.

"Keith?" she whispered.

But it wasn't Keith. Standing next to the pool, bathed in the reflected light from the water, were Yolanda and her ex-husband, George.

"George," Josephine said. She paused, not quite knowing what to say beyond that. "Uh. Xin nian kuai le." What? Why had she gone and wished him happy New Year? But it had been instinctual.

"Hi, Josie. Xin nian kuai le."

Yolanda gave him a sidelong glance, as though to say How dare you speak to my

sister after everything you've done?

"Why you in my backyard?" She didn't mean to be so rude, but really now.

"Well, he is leaving now," Yolanda said.

George looked down at his feet. "I just wanted to see you. You haven't picked up any of my calls, and—"

"Yes, George, because you cheated on me, remember? You cheated on me with—" Yolanda seemed to remember that Josephine was only a few feet away and stopped abruptly. "Look, it's been a long and terrible night ..."

"Why terrible?" George said, and Josephine detected a note of hope in his voice, like he was maybe thinking that the reason it was terrible was because he hadn't been at the reunion dinner.

"Someone died," Josephine blurted out. A small part of her relished the look of shock on George's face. He was the bastard who had hurt her sister—Yolanda had been a wreck last year, and all because of this no-good cheater.

"Wh-who?" George sputtered.

"Oh, I don't think you know her. It was Keith's fiancée."

"You do know her," Yolanda said, and now there was a sly note in her voice that made Josephine's ears prick.

Josephine gave her sister a sidelong glance. Growing up, they had been close as sisters, but Josephine always maintained a bit of distance from Yolanda because she was aware that her little sister had a bit of a cruel streak, and Josephine never quite knew how to deal with it. Now, that familiar sense of uneasiness rose inside her as

she was reminded of Yolanda's ability to hurt when she wanted to.

"I don't understand," George said.

"The girl who died. Keith's fiancée," Yolanda said. "Her name was Lacey. Lacey Lee."

A horrified moan wrenched out of George's mouth. Belatedly, Josephine wondered how Yolanda knew what Lacey's last name was. No one had mentioned it when Lacey was first introduced. Then realization crashed down on Josephine's shoulders. Her mouth fell open, her jaw scraping the ground. Her wide eyes ping-ponged back and forth between George and Yolanda.

"The woman he cheated with," Josephine choked out.

Yolanda's eyes remained on George's face, as though wanting to drink in every flicker of horror in his expression. "Yes," she said quietly. "It was Lacey."

"B-but," Josephine sputtered. The back of her neck prickled, and her entire scalp crawled like it was itching to jump off her skull. "Fran tell me Lacey was her girlfriend."

"Oh yes. That was how George and Lacey met. Fran brought her home as her girlfriend, and next thing we knew, Lacey and George became an item. George had just gotten a nice year-end bonus from his firm, didn't you, George? And you thought—hmm, how should I spend this money? On my wife of almost thirty years? Maybe on my hardworking daughter?" Yolanda's voice turned into a hiss. "Or maybe on my daughter's gold-digging girlfriend."

George's shoulders were rounded, as though he was shrinking into himself with shame. "I'm sorry," he moaned. "I don't know what I was thinking. I was a mess, I—"

“Ugh!” Josephine spit. “Yuck! Your own daughter’s girlfriend? George, that is new low. I am very disappoint in you.”

“I know,” George said. “Trust me, no one is more disappointed in me than I am. But you don’t understand, Lacey, she can be so ... persuasive.”

Josephine felt her insides curdle. How dare this man, this full-grown adult man, shift the blame onto someone half his age? And yet even as she bristled, a small part of her whispered: I can see it. She thought again of the way Lacey had touched Keith, that casual stroke of his arm, and the way Fran had said that Lacey had described her as her soulmate and the way Lacey never stopped touching her. That was exactly how she was with Keith, wasn’t it? Her manicured hands never once leaving him. A subtle pat here, a gentle stroke there. As much as Josephine despised George in this very moment, she understood to an extent the bewitching charm that Lacey had. She understood how a man like George, wilted and bored and probably in the throes of a midlife crisis, could have fallen for Lacey.

“But I don’t understand, how is she Keith’s fiancée?”

Even through the layers of shock and disgust, Josephine’s mind had continued adding to the picture of Lacey she was creating. An ugly picture, one of a shameless opportunist who used and abused people for her own personal gain. Ruthlessly ambitious, she’d thought nothing of betraying her business partner, Porter, then of dating Francine before dumping her for her father, George, and after that, leaving George for his rich nephew, Keith. A shudder rippled through Josephine’s body. What a cold, heartless young woman Lacey had been, and to think Keith had been this close to marrying her. Deep in the darkest recesses of her heart, Josephine couldn’t help thinking that Lacey perhaps—just the tiniest bit—deserved to ...

No, she shouldn’t think like that. Nobody deserved to be killed, no matter how despicable their actions. Still, she was relieved that Lacey would never become her daughter-in-law.

And now she gazed at Yolanda in a new light. It was all too easy to imagine Yolanda doing something to Lacey. After all, she had the right motivation. She'd been hurt by Lacey as both a mother and a wife. And with that cruel streak of hers ...

Josephine sighed. No matter what, she couldn't throw her sister under the bus like that. She'd always been protective of Yolanda, and the thought of turning Yolanda in to the cops sickened her.

Then Adam rushed out, panic written all over his kind face. "Jo, they took him."

It felt as though every drop of blood rushed from her head. Even as she said "What?" she knew what had happened.

"Keith," Adam said. "They asked if he'd follow them to the station, and he did!" He noticed George standing there and started. "George, what are you doing here?"

"Never mind that," Yolanda said.

For a moment, Josephine couldn't think of what to say or do. Keith had gone to the police station. Keith, her baby, her only child. He whose forehead she'd kissed a million times, whose eyelashes she'd counted every nap time, whose hand she'd sworn never to let go of.

Then it all came roaring back, and she straightened. "Okay, I will fix."

"What?" Adam said. Sweet, purehearted Adam. Keith had taken after him, and for that, Josephine was grateful.

"You go inside. I will come inside in a bit."

After so many years of marriage, Adam knew better than to argue with her. With one last confused look at her, Yolanda, and George, Adam turned and walked back inside

the house.

Josephine waited until she was sure they were alone again; then she said, “Yolanda, come.”

“Don’t follow us, George,” Yolanda said, and stalked toward Josephine.

The two of them walked away from George and spoke in hushed whispers. “Keith is police suspect,” Josephine said.

Yolanda nodded. She’d always had a soft spot for Keith. “But he is innocent, so I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“Pah! You think police care about that? They just want someone to pin it on so they can close the case. I can’t let them do that.”

Yolanda’s eyes searched hers. “No. You are a mother. You must protect him.”

Josephine squeezed Yolanda’s hands. “Yes.” They shared one more look with each other; then Josephine went back inside the house.

“I think,” Josephine heard Yolanda say to George, “you’d better leave now. Go a long way away.”

“But Yol, I want us to—”

“There is no more us .” Yolanda’s voice was as sharp and firm as a steel knife. “And you wanted more excitement in your life? You’re about to get a whole lot of excitement.”

“What do you mean? Yol?”

“Go now.”

Inside the house, Josephine walked as though in a trance through the mess of people to find the blue-eyed officer who had questioned her earlier. All noises were muted, as though she'd plunged underwater, and she could see herself moving steadily, see her arm reaching out and tapping the officer on the shoulder.

“I need to tell you something,” she said when the officer turned to face her. “Something about Lacey Lee.”

Something in her voice must have struck a chord, because as Josephine began to speak, the voices around the room gradually fell silent, every pair of eyes turning to look at her. And she told them all about Lacey and how she'd flitted from victim to victim, landing at last on Keith, who she'd finally deemed highly paid enough to marry.

“Let me get this straight,” the officer said. “The victim, Lacey Lee, was your nephew Porter's business partner, then through him, she got to know the rest of your family and started dating your niece, Francine. But then she decided to dump Francine for Francine's father, George. Then she got tired of George and decided to date your son, Keith?”

“Um—yes.”

The officer's eyebrows rose, and she muttered, “Yikes. Okay, so what you're telling me is there are a lot of people with motives to kill Lacey Lee.”

“Maybe.” She had to be very careful here. She could see Porter and Fran in the corner, staring at her with wide, terrified eyes, as though they were both waiting for her to throw them under the bus. “But I just see my brother-in-law George in backyard. And he is not invited to the dinner tonight, so why is he here? And he has the biggest motive, because Lacey cause him to be divorce, break up his marriage of

twenty-five years before she suddenly leave him for Keith.”

“What?” the officer snapped, and she clicked her fingers at her colleagues. Two of the cops rushed out to the backyard. “You could’ve led with that.”

“Oh, sorry, I just so confused,” Josephine said helplessly. She wrung her hands, hoping that George had time to get away. Maybe it was harsh, pinning it on him, but he really should’ve thought better than to date his daughter’s girlfriend while being married to Yolanda. I mean, really now, Josephine thought. He had it coming.

The officer’s radio crackled, and she walked off, snapping orders into it. Near the front door, she turned around and barked, “If any of you sees George, you need to call us right away.” Then she hurried out the door, leaving the dinner guests gaping in silence. For a long while, nobody moved. It felt as though they were suspended in time. Josephine imagined the moment crystallizing, the world wondering which way it should tip. Had she done it? Had she solved the mystery of Lacey’s murder for everyone?

“Wow,” Porter said after a while. “I gotta say, Auntie Josie, I think I prefer reunion dinners at Big Uncle’s house.”

The tension broke. The atmosphere sagged with relief.

Josephine half laughed, half sobbed.

Adam rushed to her. “Oh my god, what just happened? George? Was that why he was—oh my God, he was right outside with you and Yol! Why didn’t you say anything then?”

Josephine sighed. “I didn’t know yet, everything so confusing. Take me a second to work out.”

“My god, Jo. Are you okay? I can’t believe you were out there with him. He didn’t try anything, did he?” Adam’s eyes were burning with concern.

She leaned against him, shoving down the guilt that was coiling in her stomach. “I’m okay.” From the corner of her eye, she spotted Yolanda coming up to Fran and giving her a reassuring hug. “Let’s go get Keith from the station,” Josephine said.

Adam nodded. He looked deep into Josephine’s eyes. “I can’t believe you solved it and saved our son.”

Josephine gave him a wan smile. She hugged everyone as Adam grabbed the car keys. When she got to Yolanda, her sister squeezed her arm and gave her a look. An electric shiver went down Josephine’s neck.

Yolanda knew.

Of course, she must have known this whole time. Because that cruel streak that Yolanda had? The only reason Josephine had recognized it was because it existed within herself too. And she couldn’t let herself get too close to Yolanda because she didn’t want Yolanda to know that Josephine, too, was capable of great cruelty.

But did it count as a great cruelty, to protect her son from the clutches of the likes of Lacey? And the more that she’d learned about Lacey, the more confident Josephine felt that she’d done the right thing, pouring that rat poison in Lacey’s glass. Yes, it had been brash; she blamed it on the whiskey sours Fran had been pushing her way all day. She wouldn’t otherwise be this chaotic. And she hadn’t actually expected Lacey to drop dead, goodness me. She’d expected her to get sick, but how unlucky that she had died instead, and on Chinese New Year as well: talk about bad luck. But never mind that; Josephine believed in making her own luck. Like the way she’d given Big Uncle a gentle push, just halfway down the stairs, mind you. She hadn’t wanted to kill him, either, after all, merely make it impossible for him to host this year’s dinner. And once his broken leg healed, he’d probably bully everyone into

having next year's dinner at his, so no harm done, right?

As Adam backed the car out of the garage, she looked out the window and waved at her sister. Yolanda waved back and held Fran closer to her. A small smile touched Josephine's lips. Say what you would about today's reunion dinner, nobody could deny that it had been memorable. They would be talking about this year's dinner for many, many years to come, and wasn't that the sign of a great meal?