


A NOODLE SHOP MYSTERY

FIRST IN A  
NEW SERIES!



**DEATH  
BY  
DUMPLING**

VIVIEN  
CHIEN

**DEATH**  
 **BY**   
**DUMPLING**



**VIVIEN CHIEN**



St. Martin's Paperbacks

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
St. Martin's Press ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](http://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

**For Paul,  
father and best friend**

**Thank you for always believing.**

# CHAPTER

## 1

You know in the movies where someone says “You can’t fire me, I quit!” ... maybe don’t do that in real life. Unless you don’t mind working as a server in your parents’ Chinese restaurant for the rest of your life.

Turns out finding a new job wasn’t as easy as I thought and my portion of the rent wasn’t going to pay itself. My roommate and best friend, Megan Riley, didn’t have the extra funds to cover my half of the bills, so there was no time to waste being “in between jobs.” And to top it off, those pesky credit card people kept calling me day and night. Without any other options readily available and an ever-so-conveniently open spot at my parents’ restaurant, Ho-Lee Noodle House, I gave in.

My parents were thrilled that I needed them for something again. However, I was not. At twenty-seven, depending on my parents was not my idea of a good time. Especially since they had been trying to convince me that working at the noodle house was my destiny well before I went to college. Somehow, I had always managed to escape that reality, until now.

Lana Lee, at your service. Literally.

Things to know about me: I’m half English, half Taiwanese, and no, I don’t know karate. I’m definitely not good at math and I don’t know how to spell your name in Chinese.

The last time I had straight-up black hair, I was in high school. Since then, I’ve spent a lot of time bleaching and dyeing my hair this color or that. Currently, it’s chestnut brown with some golden peek-a-boo highlights. My mother had repeatedly assured me that one day dyeing my hair wasn’t going

to be fun anymore, and I should enjoy life without graying hair while I still could. But, what can I say, I get bored.

Leaving the house without putting on makeup means there's an emergency. Or that I've been forced out of the house against my will. If that's the case, send help.

I still have hope that the world can be a better place. This last bit has led some to call me an idealist once or twice. As far as name-calling goes, I'll take it. We've all been called worse, right?

Oh, and I have a problem with doughnuts. I love them and they love me. My older sister, Anna May, is always warning me that it's going to catch up with me at some point. That day may come, but for now, pass me the Boston cream.

And that's really the important stuff.

Aside from that, it had been six excruciating months since I started working full-time for my parents. Several factors came into play, helping this particular pursuit of employment along. We start with a foul breakup, then the previously mentioned quitting of former job, and my parents' sudden loss of their only full-time day-shift server, Lily. Really, Lily couldn't have picked a better time to walk out. I've considered sending a card of thanks.

I'm not the biggest fan of the restaurant business. That might have something to do with spending most of my childhood trapped in the back room of my parents' restaurant. As a child, I came to the restaurant every day after school where my mother would keep me stowed away in the back room near her office. She had set up a makeshift living room of sorts with a TV and couch, even a small desk where I could do my schoolwork. It wasn't until Anna May was old enough to babysit that I was allowed to go home after school. Then that started a whole new saga of my life. I called it "Stuck with Miss Know-It-All."

When I agreed to start working at the restaurant, my mom was so excited that she let me make up my own schedule. And if I was short on money, I was able to pick up extra shifts without any trouble. It didn't solve all of my money problems, but it got the bills paid, which was priority one in my life right now.

So, things could have been worse ...

I counted the ways that life could be worse as I made my way down to Mr. Feng's office with his lunch order.

Our family's restaurant, along with Mr. Feng's office, is located in the charming plaza of Asia Village, a quaint shopping center filled with what I liked to refer to as "Asian stuff and things." You name it, we got it. Need Asian food, drinks, or candy? We got it. How about a stuffed Hello Kitty for your granddaughter? We got it. Maybe you miss KTV or need some old Chinese movies? We have that too. In all, there were thirteen stores, a giant Asian grocery, my parents' restaurant, and a new karaoke bar, the Bamboo Lounge.

Northeast Ohio—more specifically, Fairview Park—isn't what you'd typically consider "Asia Central"; the original Chinatown area started out on the east side of Cleveland. It grew as Asians started to flock to the surrounding areas, and then for a time, it began to diminish. Right now, however, it was on the upswing.

Clevelanders tended to gravitate toward their own part of town despite the fact that the *other* part of town wasn't even that far. Mr. Feng, our property owner, who happened to be a dedicated west-sider, craved a more convenient location. And thus Asia Village was born. Though small, it has both charm and character. At the entrance to the parking lot is an ornate, arched entry gate decorated with gold dragons wrapping their scaly bodies around vibrant red poles. Beyond that is Asia Village itself, a tiny city of pagodas all in a row.

Inside, cobblestoned walkways wind around a large koi pond smackdab in the center of all the stores. There's a footbridge that crosses over to the other side, and if people feel like lingering by the water, they can feed the koi fish. Strung from the ceiling are red paper lanterns wishing good luck and long life, and above those are massive skylights that fill the plaza with so much natural light, you could swear you were still outside.

Some of the shop owners made their storefronts as authentic looking as possible. They kept to the traditional colors of red, gold, and black, adding Asian characters and symbols however they could. Other shop owners decided to use metal and wood textures, taking the more modern approach. For a sampling of Asian styles from past and present, Asia Village was without a doubt the place to go.



I stood now in front of the meager office of Feng and Sung. It was the most plain of all the storefronts, with two large windows, one on each side of the door, covered with miniblinds. Their names in both English and Chinese were emblazoned on the right window in gold lettering. A gold dragon sat between the words, separating their names.

Just as I was about to reach for the brass door handle, I heard yelling from inside. I stepped back, rethinking my entry, and stared at the door, miniblinds staring back at me. Well, this was awkward. The blinds were closed for privacy, and I had no idea who was in there and whether or not I should go in. I didn't want to interrupt whatever was going on.

Before I could overanalyze the situation, the door whipped open and a chubby Asian face glared at me, her cheeks red with anger. It was Kimmy Tran, and it was safe to say she was a little ticked.

Kimmy was my age and we had known each other since we were toddlers. The Tran family ran a shop called China Cinema and Song, an Asian video and music store; they'd had it for about as long as my parents had owned the restaurant. And because our parents were friends, we spent a lot of time together in our youth. As adults, we weren't terribly close friends, but there's a certain bond that develops after you spend hours together contemplating Barbie life scenarios, so we'd kept in contact despite our lives going in different directions.

She slammed the door behind her. "What a selfish jerk!" she yelled.

At a loss for words, I hugged the bag of takeout. Heat from the freshly cooked food seeped through my shirt.

"Do you have any idea what that slimeball is up to?" she asked, pointing furiously at the door. Her hair was wrapped in a sloppy bun on the top of her head, and it shook with each word.

I shook my head. "No..."

She began to pace in front of me, clenching her fists. "He's raising the rent fifteen percent!" She stopped briefly to gauge my reaction. When I didn't respond, she began to pace again. "Fifteen percent! Can you even believe that? My parents can't afford what the rent is now! It's high enough already!"

This was the first I'd heard of Mr. Feng raising the rent. I would have to ask my mother if she'd heard the same thing. "How did you find this out?" I asked.

“He slipped it in while he was telling my mother about this great plan he came up with to make Asia Village better.” She stopped to face me, placing her hands on her hips. “Better for who? For him and his wallet?”

“Well, maybe there is more to—”

“No, Lana. There are no ‘well, maybes.’ He’s a jerk and he’s selfish and someone has got to stop him before he runs us all out of here,” she said, waving her arms in the air. “He forgets that our parents were the ones who backed him up in the beginning and stuck with him through all the rough times. Now this is how he’s going to treat the people who were there for him? It’s absurd.”

She had a point with the whole parent thing, but I wasn’t sure if I should egg her on. She seemed pretty fired up on her own and I didn’t feel like getting into this discussion so early in the day.

“I’m telling you, Lana, that man is asking for it. One of these days he’s going to make the wrong person mad.” She gave a final huff and stormed off.

Well, that was bracing.

Shaking off her negative vibes, I repositioned the food in my arms and headed inside.

Mr. Feng’s office was always dimly lit and a little on the dusty side. There were two desks at opposite sides of the small, rectangular room. On both of the desks sat those small banker’s lamps with the plastic green lampshades and gold chains. Did anybody even really use those anymore? I’m pretty sure that Mr. Feng owned the last two in existence.

He had his back turned to me and was organizing something in a drawer. I purposely cleared my throat and he jerked up, turning around. Thomas Feng was not just our landlord, but a close friend of all the people who worked in Asia Village. He was a softspoken man in his mid-fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair and pronounced wrinkles around his eyes, which I’m guessing came with running a large property—and having two teenage daughters.

He kept this small office space for himself and his partner, Ian Sung, so they could have a quiet place to work on-site when necessary. I also suspected that Mr. Feng liked to have someplace away from home that he could claim as his own. Ian rarely showed up and the other desk seemed to be a courtesy, if anything.

Mr. Feng and Ian owned a couple other small properties in neighboring suburbs. Ian handled the other properties, which included a few small apartment buildings, a stand-alone Chinese grocery, and three duplexes. Asia Village—the first piece of real estate that Thomas had ever owned—was his pride and joy, and so he spent most of his days walking the plaza and checking in with the people he'd known for so many years and considered family.

“Lana ... what are you doing here?” he asked me.

“I came to drop off your lunch.”

He looked at the bag in my hands and back up at me. “Where’s Peter?”

“Oh, he had a large takeout order to finish up and couldn’t leave the kitchen. He asked if I could drop it off instead.”

Mr. Feng furrowed his brow and seemed to forget I was there. I inched up to the desk and set his food down. “Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m just ... yes ... everything is fine, Lana.”

“I ran into Kimmy Tran on my way in.” I nodded toward the door.

He sighed. “I have learned the hard way that you cannot make everyone happy.”

“I’m sure it’ll blow over. You know how Kimmy can be.”

Mr. Feng chuckled as he pulled his wallet out of the back pocket of his pants. “How is business at the restaurant? Are your parents doing okay?”

I nodded. “Things are going good enough that I don’t hear any complaints from them.”

“Do you enjoy working with them?”

I inhaled deeply, grasping for an appropriate answer. “It’s not as bad as I thought. I didn’t see myself here, but you never know where life is going to take you, I suppose.”

He handed me the money and sat on the edge of his desk. “Appreciate your parents while they are still here. One day you will want them here and it will be too late.”

I gave a polite smile as I accepted the money and said my good-byes.

# CHAPTER

## 2

Our family's restaurant has been around since the plaza's beginning. My mother, ever the traditionalist, insisted that our restaurant be decked out in red, black, and gold. Gold lettering above the door let you know that you were about to dine at Ho-Lee Noodle House, Number One Noodle Shop. And that is the only thing that has stayed the same for the entirety of its existence.

The inside followed the same theme with black lacquer tables, red walls, and gold accents. Even though the restaurant has been slightly updated a few times in the past thirty-odd years, the dining room was still partially separated into two sections. The smaller section used to be for when restaurants still had smoking sections. A portion of the restaurant was enclosed with an intricately designed wall of carved wood, with a doorway that led to the area we used for private parties.

A walkway separating the two areas takes you straight back to the kitchen. I had spent most of my childhood running up and down that aisle. And now, here I was running up and down it again, but in a completely different context.

The rest of the morning flew by and I was at the end of the lunch rush. The dining room was almost completely cleaned up and I focused my attention on wiping down a freshly vacated table. Dried sweet-and-sour sauce on a lacquered tabletop could be a real pain.

"Excuse me, young lady?" an elderly customer called from a few tables over.

Leaving the wet rag behind, I wiped my hands on my apron and gave a smile to the two elderly ladies looking up at me, their hair freshly permed with not a strand out of place. They must have been visiting the hair salon. “Did you need more tea, ma’am?” I glanced at her empty cup.

“Oh, no, thank you, dear. I’ve had so much tea, I’m ready to burst,” she replied, chuckling to her friend. “If you could, would you bring us the check?”

“Sure thing.” I headed for the front counter and printed a copy of their bill, placing it squarely on a little black tray with two fortune cookies. I placed it in the middle of their table with another sweet smile.

“Beverly,” the little old lady said, her eyes lighting up, “pick which fortune cookie you want. I think it’s going to be a good one.” She looked up at me and winked. “I do love these little things. You Orientals have the cutest traditions.”

I groaned inwardly. That term is totally outdated, except when it’s used to describe a vase or rug. Of which I am neither. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I am far from politically correct, but everybody has their pressure points.

However, in this unfair world, the customer is always right. So, instead of correcting her, I kept my smile securely in place and walked away.

The two women were the last of the lunch crowd, and I had an opportunity to lounge up front for a while. On my little perch at the hostess booth, I looked out the glass double doors and watched the shoppers shuffle through the plaza with their bags and takeout packages, probably enjoying a day off from work. Lucky ducks.

Five shop lengths down, I saw my mother’s best friend, Esther Chin, running through the plaza faster than I’ve ever seen her move. Within no time, she was thrusting open the double doors to our restaurant.

“Lana!” Esther’s hands flailed in the air, her gold bracelets jingling with each movement. “Where is your mommy? I need her...”

Esther was a tiny woman in her mid-fifties with cropped black hair and a deep love for floral prints. Today’s ensemble consisted of a black silk top with bright pink chrysanthemums that perfectly matched her lipstick.

I looked at her, bewildered. “She’s in the back room...”

Without another word, Esther flew past me screaming, “Bettyyyyyy!!!”

What on earth was going on?

Before I had time to follow her, a family of four walked in. I plastered on “the smile” and grabbed some menus, leading them to a corner booth, far from the kitchen where potential action was about to take place. After getting them situated, I hightailed it to the kitchen to grab them water and see if eavesdropping was a possibility.

Our cook, Peter Huang, looked up at me as I walked through the swinging doors. “Dude, what the heck is going on? Esther just flew through here like she was on fire!”

Peter, the son of one of my mother’s good friends who was our other full-time waitress, had worked for the restaurant since he was eighteen. Now, at the age of thirty, he’d established himself as our head chef and did a bang-up job, if I do say so myself.

For a cook, he was a toothpick. There goes that saying about not trusting skinny cooks, but if you wanted someone to make the best noodles you’ve ever had in your life, you’d want Peter behind the wok. Once my mother saw how well he did in the kitchen, she did not second-guess promoting him over our other cook, Lou, who still tore more dumpling wrappers than the rest of the staff combined.

Today Peter was dressed in his usual outfit of solid black. Instead of a chef hat, he wore a black baseball hat to cover his shaggy hair. Since I’ve known him, he’s always kept his hair long, in a Brandon Lee sort of way.

“I have no idea. I was wondering the same thing.” I grabbed four water goblets from the stacked trays of clean dishes.

“It’s got to be something serious, I’ve never seen Esther run anywhere in my life.”

We both laughed.

I filled the glasses with ice and water, as slowly as possible, hoping the door to the back room would open and we’d get some answers. No such luck. I headed back out into the dining area disappointed. How exciting could it really be? I asked myself, trying to pacify my curiosity. I mean, it was Esther. The highlights of her life were mah-jong and shopping for new floral prints more chipper than the last.

After I had taken the family’s order and given them their drinks, I slipped back into the kitchen, and stood outside the door to the back room with my ear pressed up against it. Peter watched in anticipation.

Without warning, the door swung open, nearly knocking me over. Thanks to my ninja-like reflexes, I caught myself before kissing the floor.

My mother jumped, startled by my proximity. “Ai-ya! Lana! What are you doing?”

“Nothing...”

She stared impatiently at me, her arms folded over her chest. Even at five feet two inches she was intimidating. Don’t let my mother fool you. Sure, she looks sweet enough in her cute pastel blouses, and her chubby cheeks give her a warm, friendly look that’s deceptively trustworthy. She looks innocent enough, but like the pagoda walls outside, it was just a façade. She could crush a man like a bug if she had to.

Esther rushed past us, exiting through the swinging doors back into the dining room.

“What is Esther’s deal?” I asked, pointing toward the dining room, and pretending my mother wasn’t giving me “the look.”

“Do we have customers?” my mother asked, ignoring my question.

“Just one family, they’re waiting on their food.” I glanced at Peter who had slipped back into cooking mode.

“Okay, good. Lock the door. No more customers today. Mr. Feng died.”

My stomach dropped. “What?”

In the background, I heard Peter drop his metal spatula.

“Esther called the police already, they are coming now.” She waved her hand toward the dining room doors. “Now go, lock the door, no more customers today.”

\* \* \*

I got the family of four paid up and out the door. The CLOSED sign was facing out, and I dead-bolted the entrance. During that time, the police had shown up along with an ambulance. I saw the gurney go by and all eyes followed the procession down to Mr. Feng’s office.

I could see Esther standing outside the office door, wringing her hands. Cindy Kwan from the bookstore was standing next to her, and I wondered why she was there.

My mother had called my dad to inform him of the news and he arrived in record time. They came out of the kitchen with Peter in tow. My mother

looked solemn, and I didn't have the heart to ask what happened. They joined me at the entrance and the four of us stood lumped together at the glass doors staring out at the circus of people starting to congregate outside the property office. None of us said a word or even seemed to breathe for several minutes while we watched the commotion outside our doors.

My dad broke the silence. "Cindy from the bookstore was meeting Tom for a business meeting and found him slumped over his desk. She tried to wake him up, but when he was unresponsive she ran over to Esther's and they called the police." My dad shook his head. "I can't imagine what his wife must be going through right now."

My dad, William Lee, is a big ole white guy. Looking at my sister and me, people assume both our parents are Asian, especially because the name Lee throws people off. They usually assume it's attributed to an Asian background but actually is thanks to my dad's English background. My dad doesn't have a neat accent, but my grandparents do. They call me things like *love* and taught me about scones. Anyway, it's always fun watching the reaction on someone's face when they meet my dad for the first time.

He is extremely white. There's no two ways around it. Sometimes, he reminds me of those posters you see in a bank of some guy shaking hands with overly excited homeowners. Which isn't too far from reality because he's a Realtor. He even comes with his own million-dollar smile and crisp, well-fitted suit.

He does pretty well for a guy in his mid-fifties. At first when his hair started to go gray, he had a panic attack and bought an entire case of Just for Men, but eventually he came around and concluded that it gave him a more "distinguished" look and might even help him in the realty business. My mom hated to see all that dye go to waste, so now she uses it to touch up her roots. Hey, I don't judge.

"According to Esther, she thinks he's been like that for a little over an hour," my dad informed us.

I looked up at him; he towered over me at six feet. "What makes Esther think that?"

"He was lying next to a takeout box ... there was still food left."

I gulped. His lunch ... the lunch that I brought him.

I contemplated that statement and the timing of my visit. I believed in timing. Kind of like when you see a major car accident that just happened



and you were running five minutes late that morning. Suddenly, you're not so upset about being late, almost as if it were a favor in disguise.

My mother, who hadn't spoken a single word, lifted her tiny hand and unlocked the dead bolt. Softly she said, "Let's see what's going on."

"Betty." My dad reached a hand for her shoulder. "Maybe we should stay here."

"No ... I want to go."

My father didn't argue. My mother pushed open the door and instantly we were exposed to a clamor of voices. Following behind her, my dad kept a protective hand on her back and Peter and I brought up the rear of our little procession.

There must have been around a hundred people standing outside the office. Shoppers hung around waiting to see what the commotion was about and fellow shopkeepers had abandoned their posts to get a closer look.

We stood at the edge of the crowd. My mother, curious but not wanting to go any farther, secured her space and stared intently in the general direction of the office.

Time dripped on and just when I thought I couldn't take any more, the door to the office sprang open and two paramedics came out with a gurney carrying a rather human-shaped body bag. Behind them appeared two uniformed officers and a grave-looking man in a charcoal-gray suit.

One of the paramedics shouted, asking the crowd to move aside and let them through. Like migrating birds, the cluster of people moved as one, making room down the center, letting the gurney pass.

As they passed us, I couldn't take my eyes off the body bag. My brain worked overtime trying to acknowledge that someone I knew and cared about was in there. I had never seen a dead body in this scenario before. Although I suppose not many people my age really do.

Esther came fluttering over. She hugged my mother, and they shared a moment of hurried Mandarin together.

Esther glanced among the four of us. "I heard the man in gray say that maybe Thomas died from allergies."

"You mean an allergic reaction?" my father asked to clarify.

She nodded slowly. "Yah, yah, yah..."

For a minute, my attention was taken away from the gurney as what Esther said registered in my mind. The whole Village knew that Mr. Feng

had a shellfish allergy. And it wasn't something that he trifled with. He was always very careful about what he ate and how he ordered food. Even at our restaurant, we had special instructions for preparing his orders. On top of that, he always carried an EpiPen as a safety precaution.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered seeing the tip of it sticking out of his shirt pocket.

It was possible that Esther had heard wrong. She was in shock after all. We all were.

The paramedics had crossed the plaza and we watched as they exited through the main entrance on the other side of the building. As the doors shut, my mother burst into tears.

# CHAPTER

## 3

After Thomas had been ... *taken* from the plaza, many of the smaller shops closed for the remainder of the day. Ho-Lee Noodle House was one among the many who decided the rest of the workday would just be absolutely unbearable. Once calls were made to the rest of the staff, and everything was situated, my parents sent me home.

My mom had left almost immediately to call on Donna Feng to give her condolences and see if she needed anything. My dad, Peter, and I settled the loose ends at the restaurant. I offered to go over to my parents' place and sit with them for a while, but my dad insisted I go home and get some rest.

The place I call home is a two-bedroom, garden-style apartment in North Olmsted, and the drive to and from work isn't a long one. Fifteen minutes tops. The apartment that Megan and I picked out wasn't glamorous by any means. It was your basic cookie-cutter apartment with off-white paint and that funky brown carpet that no one ever likes.

Megan and I, both unsatisfied with the look of things, took it upon ourselves to redecorate the apartment, hoping to give it a warmer vibe, something more homey-looking. Megan, who was the real decorator of the two of us, did most of the work. I helped with the shopping and painting.

The apartment as a whole was still a work in progress, but the living room, now covered in soft grays and lavenders, felt comfy yet elegant when you walked in. Our next project was the bathroom and I knew that long hours of picking out paint swatches at Home Depot were in my near future.

When I got inside, my dog, Kikkoman, was waiting for me at the door, her curly black tail wiggling in excitement. Kikko, my black-as-soy-sauce pug, looked up at me, her tongue hanging out of her mouth. She looked as if she were grinning and it forced a smile out of me. At least someone was having a good day.

Megan was sitting on the couch, chatting away on her cell phone. Her blond hair was swept up in a tight ponytail on top of her head and her casual outfit—black T-shirt and skinny jeans—gave me the impression that she was heading to work. She told whoever she was talking to that she had to go and hung up as I was shutting the door.

She looked me up and down, her hazel eyes scrutinizing my appearance. “You look like hell, woman.”

“Gee, thanks,” I mumbled under my breath.

“What happened today? I texted you a bunch of times and you never responded.”

I dug in my purse and pulled out my phone. Five missed text messages. “Oops, sorry.”

“I was going to stop by and see you today, but then Nikki called and you know how she can just go on forever. I’ve been on the phone with her for like three hours talking about her relationship issues with Kyle, and it just went on and on. I swear, she doesn’t take a breath sometimes ... and hey, what are you doing home from work already?” She looked down, checking the time on her phone and back up at me.

I felt my lip quiver, and the tears welling in my eyes. Megan’s expression changed from quizzical to concerned and then she said those magic words, “*What’s wrong?*” and I burst into tears.

Sitting on the couch with Kikko between us, I went through the whole story from Esther running in to tell my mother the news, to my dad informing us that Mr. Feng died almost right after I saw him, and finally to the body bag being wheeled through the plaza.

Megan, in the meantime, had grabbed a box of tissues and balanced it on her knee. “Wow ... that’s intense. And, kind of scary. I mean, what, the guy was in his fifties, right? Seems so young.”

“I know.” I sniffled into my tissue. “I keep going back to our conversation, it was so trivial.” Kikko put a paw on my leg and huffed as if she sympathized.