

# BOOKED & PRINTED

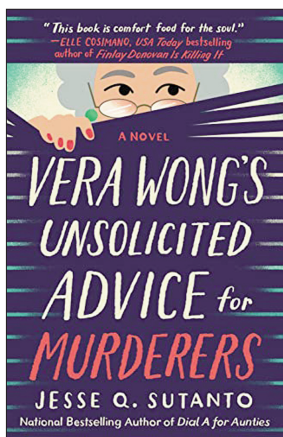
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LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

Powerful personalities can act as trusted guides in the best of cases, or dangerous bullies in the worst of cases. Charismatic, self-assured, outspoken individuals can attract loyal acolytes, or repel skeptical onlookers. What to do with a convincing, utterly compelling, uncensored leader? *Booked and Printed* examines two mysteries with magnetic personalities at their hearts, and the affected witnesses and victims who follow or resist them.

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In *VERA WONG'S UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR MURDERERS*, we open with the titular character's morning routine—the first, self-assured moments of her regimented day. Vera is an iron-willed widow who refuses to retire and has an excellent reason for everything she chooses to do. She texts her adult son at four thirty A.M. to chastise him not to sleep too late. She thinks of expert tea recipes to serve at her business, never mind that she averages about one customer per day. She bemoans the hipster invasion of San Francisco's Chinatown. Her sole daily regular at her establishment, Vera Wang's World-Famous Teahouse—named after the more famous businesswoman, only one vowel off—is an elderly, downcast neighbor. Though Vera has the ferocious self-assurance well-earned by an immigrant senior, her existence is a rather lonely one, revolving around her failing business.



Until she walks into her shop one morning to find broken glass and a dead body: Marshall Chen.

From there, Vera's teahouse grows bustling, visited by one onlooker after another. First there are the police who refuse her insistence on serving them her best tea. Then there are the young people: Rika, a programmer; Sana, a visual artist; Julia, Marshall's widow, and Emma, their toddler daughter; and Oliver, Marshall's twin brother. Vera quickly deduces the police officers' indifference to the case; they claim Marshall died of natural causes. She is certain he did not. She adds every visitor to her list of suspects, begins taking notes, and carries not one iota of doubt that she will find the culprit.

The victim, Marshall, is revealed to have been a greedy lout with no shortage of enemies. He is hardly missed, and so the culprit, from a long list of suspects, is no easy find. Each character carries their own sour memories of Marshall, remembering what they once hoped of him, and what they tried to do when he betrayed them.

In the meantime, Vera inveigles her way into the suspects' lives, cooking for them, badgering them, and overwhelming them with guidance. What begins as a cozy mystery soon grows into a caper of found family.

Jesse Q. Sutanto's mystery debut was *Dial A for Aunties*, another comical murder caper driven by a formidable group of diasporic women. Vera Wong is an additional appealing character in Sutanto's arsenal, a neighborhood leader with indefatigable cooking, matchmaking, babysitting, career-advising, and private detective skills. Sutanto's growing body of work makes a convincing case for the power of immigrant aunties as a major life force.

Vera is optimistic and full of certainty, a kind of pied piper of shell-shocked suspects who need a leader. While learning her new acquaintances' personal histories, and asking personal questions that often shock them, she brews teas that readers will ache to try—jin xuan, chrysanthemum, ginseng. She cooks daily feasts—dim sum, beef noodles, pork belly—to sustain the ragtag group who may have been responsible for Marshall's departure from this earth. In improving her suspects' lives, she gets closer to the truth, leading to a satisfyingly surprising outcome.

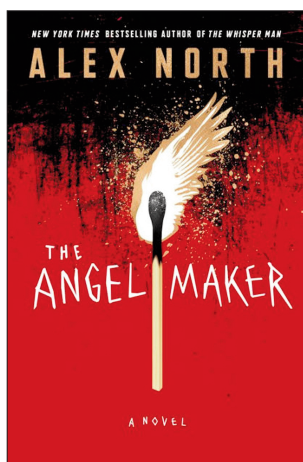
Readers looking for a romp that makes them feel a little less alone will find, in Vera Wong, a fun mentor and a funny adventure.

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In *THE ANGEL MAKER*, Christopher Shaw has suffered in multiple ways. He was the victim of a terrible act of violence in his childhood. Left alone for a moment by his older sister Katie, he fell prey to a man who lacerated his face. As a young man, Chris suffered the ravages of substance use disorder, eventually stealing from his own family and living outside in squalor.

Now, after having been missing for years, Chris is in proximity to a horrifying crime: An elderly philosophy professor, Alan Hobbes, was nearly decapitated in his own home. Chris's old facial wound, and this new murder, may have a connection to an earlier serial killer, a charismatic murderer who claimed to see the past, present, and future.

Author Alex North constructs a dark thriller of family legacies, dangerous dogmas, and terrible violence, all driven by an old, private philosophy of one sociopathic



father. Though police are skeptical, Chris's sister Katie is sure her own family will fall victim to some unseen threat. To protect them, she seeks out her brother at the same time officers do, searching for answers and attempting to save him from whatever will make him suffer next.

While the present-day mystery unravels, readers travel back in time to when two young brothers do the bidding of a captivating father. A man writes his own philosophy to justify his acts of murder as preordained, pulling his children in his fearsome wake.

What begins with two brothers worshipping and obeying their own father's dangerous commands expands into a tangled mystery of vengeance and misplaced faith. Some transitions of time and character may take rereading; the jumps are frequent, and it can be difficult to discern the philosophy of preordained destiny North details. But readers looking for a thriller with generational echoes and cultish underpinnings will be rewarded with *The Angel Maker's* plotting, which eventually gathers all its complications into a fiery conclusion.