

JUST LIKE FAMILY by Barbara Casey

EXCERPT

Cora wasn't able to sleep a wink for thinking about all that Vince and Charlie had talked about. That and all those chips she had eaten while visiting with Suong the day before. She even thought about calling Suong on the telephone at some point and asking her to come over right then. But she decided against it owing to the lateness of the hour and thinking, also, it might be better to plan out what she was going to say to Suong when she came over this morning. And she needed to bake some more cookies anyway. Now in the light of a new day she was glad that she had waited to talk to Suong. After all, she had just met her, and Cora wasn't sure how she would take to the idea, being Vietnamese and all. But Suong had seemed open-minded enough during the brief time Cora spent with her, and Cora had gotten the definite feeling when visiting with her that Suong really didn't want to live with her daughter and son-in-law. Situations like that were usually difficult at best.

She opened the vertical blinds on her front window to the position where they stood straight out and she could see anything that moved within a two-block radius. Then she hobbled back to her chair and sat for several minutes thinking and vigorously kneading the necks of KittyPussy. Vince and Charlie had certainly presented her with an interesting proposition, but they were expecting Cora to come up with another woman to join them. Cora knew a lot of women, but none she would dare approach with such an idea. Suong was different. The funny way she dressed for one thing, and that pitiful excuse for a doll she drug around with her everywhere she went. But she also had a strong streak of independence that Cora had recognized immediately. Cora respected that. Suong was a little forgetful at times, but as far as that goes, so was Cora. She was forever forgetting where she had placed her eyeglasses. Suong could sew, too. She made all of her own clothes and Ngoc Tuyet's. And she was smart. It hadn't taken her any time to figure out what was going on in the stories. In fact, Cora really liked Suong. So no matter what, Suong would have to agree to the plan as well or Cora wouldn't go along with it.

She reached for the pad of paper and pencil she kept on the table next to her chair for the purpose of making notes to herself. Vince apparently had plenty of money. Charlie, on the other hand, had nothing but a little income from a retirement fund coming in each month. Cora had her hefty monthly alimony, some insurance, and some savings. Even though Suong didn't tell her a whole lot

about it, Cora figured that she was getting some sort of payment from the government each month, like a death benefit maybe from her late husband or an annuity. It probably wasn't much, but it wouldn't take much to live on if the house was paid for and the four of them split up all of the expenses. Suong's contribution would be her sewing. And judging from the appearance of Vince and Charlie, there would be plenty of that. Cora could do what she loved—cooking. Charlie would take care of the yard. And Vince would keep things fixed as well as put up the money for buying the house and any initial repairs. And, as he explained it, the property would be listed in each of their names in equal shares. If one of them died, that share would be divided among the others.

Cora could feel the excitement bubble inside of her. Of course she wanted to see the property. Vince had explained that it was big enough for each of them to have all of the privacy they needed, and that with a little paint and wallpaper and a few new downspouts, and maybe some shutters, he could make it into a showplace. But Cora believed that houses put out auras just like people. There were friendly houses and there were unfriendly houses. And she sure didn't want to spend the rest of her life in an unfriendly house. She would be able to tell once she walked through it as to which kind of house it was. And then, assuming the house had a friendly aura, and Suong was agreeable, and the four of them felt like they could get along with each other all living under the same roof, then it might work out.

No one had mentioned furniture. Cora knew that Suong had very little, and she suspected that Charlie had rented his apartment already furnished. Vince had his own, because Cora had watched him move it from his house into the apartment he rented. Of course, she had her lovely antiques plus all of that furniture still in storage. Some of it had been her mother's. So that along with Vince's furniture and what she had in her own apartment would go a long way toward furnishing a house. That is, if its aura was good, of course.

Cora heard Suong's tiny little shuffling steps. A glance out the verticals confirmed it. By the time Suong reached the front door, Cora was there inviting her and Ngoc Tuyet to come in. Smiling, Suong presented Cora with the hanky she had made. After several minutes of thank you's and you shouldn't have's, exclamations over Suong's wonderful sewing talents and generous nature, and reassurances that Suong suffered no difficulty in finding Cora's apartment, Cora positioned Suong and her doll on the sofa where Vince had made his offer the day before. Not wanting Suong to be distracted while she talked, she waited while first Kitty, then Pussy, growled at Ngoc Tuyet, smelled her, and eventually settled down next to her. Then she threw out, in a manner of speaking, the whole idea. For unlike Vince who felt as a gentleman he must cloak the plan in such a way as not to offend the genteel lady

from the South, Cora simply blurted out everything as she understood it, as one mature woman to another looking for something better in life than to spend her remaining days living alone in the Palm View apartments.

There were a few things, owing to the different cultures and backgrounds of the two ladies, that were confusing to Suong. For even though she had learned to speak the English language and used it fairly efficiently, an occasional phrase or expression, or perhaps an unusual word, would sometimes give her difficulty—words such as alliance, fishy, aura, and diuretic. But, undaunted, Cora shoved on until the whole matter was as clear to Suong as it was to Cora, even up to the point of what Cora was planning to serve all of them for lunch the next day before driving over to “the property” to look at it. And it was to Cora’s great delight that Suong too liked the idea.