FRONT DESK

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FRONT DESK

KELLY YANG

ALSO BY KELLY YANG

Three Keys (Front Desk #2)

For older readers:

Parachutes

To Eliot, Tilden, and Nina,
In loving memory of my late grand father,
and to my parents, who taught me to dream

CHAPTER 1

My parents told me that America would be this amazing place where we could live in a house with a dog, do whatever we want, and eat hamburgers 'til we were red in the face. So far, the only part of that we've achieved is the hamburger part, but I was still holding out hope. And the hamburgers here are pretty good.

The most incredible burger I've ever had was at the Houston Space Center last summer. We weren't planning on eating there — everybody knows museum food is fifty thousand times more expensive than outside food. But one whiff of the sizzling bacon as we passed by the café and my knees wobbled. My parents must have heard the howls of my stomach, because the next thing I knew, my mother was rummaging through her purse for coins.

We only had enough money for one hamburger, so we had to share. But, man, what a burger. It was a mile high with real bacon and mayonnaise and pickles!

My mum likes to tease that I devoured the whole

thing in one gulp, leaving the two of them only a couple of crumbs. I'd like to think I gave them more than that.

The other thing that was great about that Space Center was the free air-conditioning. We were living in our car that summer, which sounds like a lot of fun but actually wasn't, because our car's AC was busted. So, after the burger, my dad parked himself in front of the vent and stayed there the entire rest of the time. It was like he was trying to turn his fingers into popsicles.

My mum and I bounced from exhibit to exhibit instead. I could barely keep up with her. She was an engineer back in China, so she loves maths and rockets. She oohed and aahed over this module and that module. I wished my cousin Shen could have been there. He *loves* rockets too.

When we got to the photo booth, my mother's face lit up. The booth took a picture of you and made it look like you were a real astronaut in space. I went first. I put my head where the cardboard cutout was and smiled when the guy said, *"Cheese."* When it was my mum's turn to take her photo, I thought it would be funny to jump into her shot. The result was a picture of her in an astronaut suit, hovering over Earth, and me standing right next to her in my flip-flops, doing bunny ears with my fingers.

My mother's face crumpled when she saw her picture. She pleaded with the guy to let her take another one,

but he said, "No can do. One picture per person." For a second, I thought she was going to cry.

We still have the picture. Every time I look at it, I wish I could go back in time. If I could do it all over again, I would not photobomb my mum's picture. And I'd give her more of my burger. Not the whole thing but definitely some more bites.

• • •

At the end of that summer, my dad got a job as an assistant fryer at a Chinese restaurant in California. That meant we didn't have to live in our car anymore and we could move into a small one-bedroom flat. It also meant my dad brought home fried rice from work every day. But sometimes, he'd also bring back big ol' blisters all up and down his arm. He said they were just allergies. But I didn't think so. I think he got them from frying food all day long in the sizzling wok.

My mum got a job in the front of the restaurant as a waitress. Everybody liked her, and she got great tips. She even managed to convince the boss to let me go with her to the restaurant after school, since there was nobody to look after me.

My mother's boss was a wrinkly white-haired Chinese man who reeked of garlic and didn't believe in wasting anything — not cooking oil, not toilet paper, and

certainly not free labour.

"You think you can handle waitressing, kid?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir!" I said. Excitement pulsated in my ear. My first job! I was determined not to let him down.

There was just one problem — I was only nine then and needed two hands just to hold one dish steady. The other waitresses managed five plates at a time. Some didn't even need hands — they could balance a plate on their shoulder.

When the dinner rush came, I too loaded up my carrying tray with five dishes. Big mistake. As my small back gave in to the mountainous weight, all my dishes came crashing down. Hot soup splashed onto customers, and fried prawns went flying across the restaurant.

I was fired on the spot and so was my mother. No amount of begging or promising to do the dishes for the next gazillion years would change the owner's mind. The whole way home, I fought tears in my eyes.

I thought of my three cousins back home. None of them had ever gotten fired before. Like me, they were only children as well. In China, every child is an only child, ever since the government decided all families are allowed only one. Since none of us had siblings, we were our siblings. Leaving them was the hardest part about leaving China.

I didn't want my mum to see me cry in the car, but eventually that night, she heard me. She came into my room and sat on my bed. "Hey, it's okay," she said in Chinese, hugging me tight. "It's not your fault."

She wiped a tear from my cheek. Through the thin walls, I could hear the sounds of husbands and wives bickering and babies wailing from the neighbouring apartments, each one as cramped as ours.

"Mum," I asked her, "why did we come here? Why did we come to America?" I repeated.

My mother looked away and didn't say anything for a long time. A plane flew overhead, and the picture frames on the wall shook.

She looked in my eyes.

"Because it's freer here," she finally said, which didn't make any sense. Nothing was free in America. Everything was so expensive.

"But, Mum — "

"One day, you'll understand," she said, kissing the top of my head. "Now go to sleep."

I drifted to sleep, thinking about my cousins and missing them and hoping they were missing me back.

• • •

After my mother got fired from the restaurant, she got

very serious about job hunting. She called it getting back on her horse. It was 1993 and she bought every Chinese newspaper she could find. She pored over the jobs section with a magnifying glass like a scientist. That's when she came across an unusual listing.

A man named Michael Yao had put an ad out in the Chinese newspaper looking for an experienced motel manager. The ad said that he owned a little motel in Anaheim, California, and he was looking for someone to run the place. The job came with free boarding too! My mother jumped up and grabbed the phone — our rent then cost almost all my dad's salary. (And who said things in America were free?)

To her surprise, Mr. Yao was equally enthusiastic. He didn't seem to mind that my parents weren't experienced and *really* liked the fact that they were a couple.

"Two people for the price of one," he joked in his thick Taiwanese-accented Mandarin when we went over to his house the next day.

My parents smiled nervously while I tried to stay as still as I could and not screw it up for them, like I'd screwed up my mother's restaurant job. We were sitting in the living room of Mr. Yao's house, or rather, his mansion. I made myself look at the floor and not stare at the top of Mr. Yao's head, which was all shiny under the light, like it

had been painted in egg white.

The door opened, and a boy about my age walked in. He had on a t-shirt that said *I don't give a*, and underneath it, a picture of a rat and a donkey. I raised an eyebrow.

"Jason," Mr. Yao said to the boy. "Say hello."

"Hi," Jason muttered.

My parents smiled at Jason.

"What grade are you in?" they asked him in Chinese.

Jason replied in English, "I'm going into fifth grade."

"Ah, same as Mia," my mum said. She smiled at Mr. Yao. "Your son's English is so good." She turned to me. "Hear that, Mia? No accent."

My cheeks burned. I felt my tongue in my mouth, like a limp lizard.

"Of course he speaks good English. He was born here," Mr. Yao said. "He speaks *native* English."

Native. I mouthed the word. I wondered if I worked really hard, would I also be able to speak native English one day? Or was that something completely off-limits for me? I looked over at my mum, who was shaking her head. Jason disappeared off to his room, and Mr. Yao asked my parents if they had any questions.

"Just to make sure, we can live at the motel for free?" my mum asked.

"Yes," Mr. Yao said.

"And . . . what about . . ." My mum struggled to get the words out. She shook her head, embarrassed to say it. "Will we get paid?"

"Oh, right, payment," Mr. Yao said, like it hadn't dawned on him at all. "How's five dollars a customer?"

I glanced at my mum. I could tell that she was doing maths in her head because she always got this dreamy smile on her face.

"Thirty rooms at five dollars a room — that's a hundred and fifty dollars a night," my mum said, her eyes widening. She looked at my dad. "That's a lot of money!"

It was a humongous amount of money. We could buy hamburgers every day, one for each of us — we wouldn't even need to share!

"When can you start?" Mr. Yao asked.

"Tomorrow," my mum and dad blurted out at the exact same time.

Mr. Yao laughed.

As my parents got up to shake his hands, Mr. Yao muttered, "I have to warn you. It's not the nicest motel in the world."

My parents nodded. I could tell it made no difference to them what the motel looked like. It could look like the inside of a toilet for all we cared; at $150 a day plus free rent, we were in.

CHAPTER 2

The Calivista Motel sat on the corner of Coast Boulevard and Meadow Lane. It was a small motel, the first of three motels in a row. The Topaz Inn and the Lagoon Motel were right next door and bigger, but I immediately decided I liked our little motel the best. With its creamy walls and red doors, it looked warm and inviting. I looked up at the sign and read the words *LOW RATES. CABLE TV. DISNEYLAND — JUST FIVE MILES AWAY.* Excitedly, I asked my parents if that meant we could visit and go on all the rides.

"We probably could!" my mom said.

I smiled, savouring the moment. Our lives were about to change. We were going to become Disneyland-going people.

As if things couldn't get any better, the Calivista had a pool! It was right out in front. The water sparkled under the golden sun. I closed my eyes and pictured myself doing cannonballs in the water all summer long. This was

going to be amazing!

Just behind the pool was the front office. I'd asked my parents in the car whether I could help out at the front desk, and my dad had chuckled and said, "We'll see."

Mr. Yao was waiting for us in the front office. He buzzed us in and lifted the divider so we could all get behind the front desk.

The front desk was a long wooden desk that stretched almost the entire width of the room. Just behind the front office were the manager's quarters, where Mr. Yao led us next. There was a living room with a bed in it. He pointed to the bed.

"You guys sleep there," he said to my parents. "So you can hear the customers in the middle of the night."

"Customers come in the middle of the night?" my dad asked. Mr. Yao nodded. "Of course. It's a motel."

"But won't that wake them up?" I asked.

Mr. Yao rolled his eyes.

"That's the point," he said.

Next he led us over to the small bedroom, just to the right of the living room and the kitchen.

"The girl can sleep here," Mr. Yao said. For some reason, he still kept calling me "the girl" even though I had already told him my name several times.

I put my stuff down in the small bedroom, then joined

my parents and Mr. Yao in the front office. Mr. Yao was explaining the buzzer.

"One wrong buzz and it's all over," he said. "See that glass?"

He pointed to the thick glass enclosing the front office.

"That's bulletproof glass. You see a bad guy come up, you don't need to worry. They can't hurt you. But if you press this buzzer . . ."

He put his fingers on the buzzer just under the front desk and a loud *buzz* roared.

"That door right there gets unlocked," Mr. Yao said.

"And then what?" I asked him.

"Then he's inside," Mr. Yao said.

I looked around to see if there were any other magical buttons or bulletproof glass inside the office — there weren't. I asked Mr. Yao how we could tell if someone was a bad guy.

"Based on how they look, of course," he said, which made me wonder, because it's not like bad people walked around with a sticker on their heads saying *I'm bad*.

"The bottom line is, don't let in any bad guys!" Mr. Yao warned. His pupils expanded as he said the word *bad*.

• • •

While Mr. Yao took my parents out back to show them the laundry room and cleaning supplies, I stayed in the front office. I climbed up on top of the front desk stool. Gently, I reached down and touched the buzzer with my finger. It was greasy, like it had been pressed hundreds of times. Slowly, I pressed on it and heard it zap. I pressed it again. *Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.* Power coursed through my fingertips.

I closed my eyes and pictured myself checking customers in. *Why, yes, Mrs. Connolly, I'd be glad to show you to your room. Right this way!* I'd say. *Certainly, I can help you with your luggage. It would be my pleasure.*

So deep was I in my fake customer relations that I almost didn't hear it when a real customer walked up and tapped on the front office glass. I looked up to see a thin African American man about fifty or so years old, smiling and waving at me. He motioned with his hand for me to buzz him in.

"Oh, right!" I said, then pressed on the buzzer. *Buzz.*

He pushed open the door and walked in.

"Just saw Mr. Yao in the lot. You must be the new managers," he said. He extended his hand across the front desk. "Name's Hank."

I smiled, took his hand, and shook it. "I'm Mia. Nice to meet you."

He tilted his head to one side.

"How old are you, Mia?"

"I'm ten," I told him.

"Say, aren't you a little young to be running this place?" he teased me.

I laughed. I liked Hank immediately. "I'm helping my parents," I told him. "What about you? Do you live here?"

"Sure do," he said, and pointed to one of the rooms. "That's me right there. Number twelve."

Hank informed me that he wasn't a regular customer, the kind who stays just a day or two. He was a weekly. A weekly is someone who pays by the week. There were five of them at the Calivista — they were Mrs. Q, Mrs. T, Hank, Billy Bob, and Fred.

"You'll meet them," he said. "They're all nice people."

I smiled.

"Do you guys like living here?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Well, except for Mr. Yao. Everyone hates Mr. Yao."

"Really?" I asked him. "He seems all right." Intense, but all right.

Hank snorted. "Trust me, he's anything but all right."

Before I could ask Hank what he meant by that, the back door creaked open and my parents and Mr. Yao came back in. When I turned around, Hank was gone.

CHAPTER 3

"Sign here on the dotted line," Mr. Yao said to my parents, presenting them with an enormous employment contract six pages long.

My parents beamed as they proudly signed their names. Mr. Yao took the signed employment contract and stuffed it into his bag.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Yao, for giving us this opportunity," my father said. "You don't know how much it means to us." He got choked up as he said the words.

"We promise we'll take good care of your motel," my mum added. "We won't let you down."

Mr. Yao nodded and held up the manager's keys to the motel. As my parents reached for the keys, he held them just out of reach.

"Everything that happens in this motel is your responsibility, you understand?" he asked. "Something breaks, you have to pay for it."

My parents nodded.

"Under no circumstances are you ever to leave the motel unattended. Ever. One of you must always stay behind."

Again my parents nodded eagerly, even though I was thinking, *Wait — what? I can't go out with both my parents at the same time? But what about Disneyland?*

But it was condition number three that really made my jaw drop.

Mr. Yao turned to me.

"You can't use the pool, kid," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"If you use the pool, then all the customers will want to use the pool."

"So?"

"So think of all the water and towels they'll be wasting," he said. "It's not good for the environment."

I frowned at him. Somehow, I doubted this was about the environment.

"She understands. You won't use the pool, will you, Mia?" My mother shook her head at me.

I glanced at my mum, at the desperation in her eyes.

"Okay," I said.

"Good." Mr. Yao grinned, satisfied. He tossed my parents the keys.

• • •

That night, the sweet smells of jasmine tea filled the front office. My parents only ever got the jasmine tea out for special occasions. We had packed a small tin of it before we left China, and every time something good happened, my mum would take out a few leaves and make some tea. I guess not a lot of good things had happened because there was still quite a lot left. But all that was about to change. Tonight, my parents poured generously from the tin.

The calming aroma brought me back to my grandmother's house, all of us crowded around the table. At these big family dinners my cousin Shen and I would always giggle and interrupt each other as we talked.

I felt an ache in my tummy, razor-sharp, at the thought of Shen. I still remembered the day I left. I could see Shen's face pressed up against the glass by the security gate at the airport, blinking furiously, like he was trying hard not to cry. I was too.

On the plane ride over, they gave us little packets of butter for our bread. Butter was very expensive in China, so I asked for extras and put them in my pocket. I saved them for Shen for months in the fridge until it finally sank in that we weren't going back. So I ate them.

My mother's voice jerked me back to reality.

"Hey, Mia! Look here! Look at me!" she said, smiling.

"Huh?" I asked.

I looked up to see my mother crouching in front of the front desk, holding her hands up like she was going to take a picture. It's this thing she does. My mum says it's important to take pictures of the nice moments in life, even if it's just in your head. As my mum pressed down on her pretend camera, my dad and I sat up straight and gave her our very best smiles.

"Aubergine!" she said in Chinese, and I giggled, because even though that's what people in China said whenever someone took pictures, it was funny hearing it in America.

• • •

As my parents unpacked, I slipped out the back to find Hank. I brought him a cup of jasmine tea — now that we were making $150 a day, surely we could afford to buy some more. I had seen a Chinese supermarket on the way over here.

Hank's room was in the back, beside the laundry room. There was a pot of cherry tomato plants in front of his room. I knocked on the door.

Hank answered on the first knock. His eyebrows shot up when he saw the tea.

"That for me?" he exclaimed.

I smiled and handed it to him.

"It's from China," I told him.

"Get out of here!"

The guy next door opened his door to see what was going on. He was a white guy about the same age as Hank. He wore a Hawaiian shirt, and he had a small tattoo of a boat on his arm. The smell of popcorn drifted from his room.

"Billy Bob!" Hank said. "Meet Mia. She's the new manager. And look, she brought me some tea from China!"

"Good to meet you, Mia," Billy Bob said, extending a hand.

I shook it.

"Pleasure's all mine," I said.

Billy Bob smiled. "Say, you're a lot nicer than the old manager!"

"The last manager treated us like second-class citizens," Hank added.

"Really?" I asked.

Hank nodded. Carefully, he lifted the cup to his lips and took a sip. "Oh, this stuff is *good*."

Hank turned to Billy Bob. "You've got to try this."

More doors opened, and soon all the weeklies were outside, talking and sipping the tea under the glowing crescent moon. Like Billy Bob, they were white too. Mrs.

Q had long wavy hair that ran all the way down her back. Fred had a big belly that shook when he laughed. And Mrs. T had glittery cat-eye reading glasses, which she wore on the tip of her nose. Hank was right — they were all very nice.

The weeklies asked if I wanted to join them for a game of Monopoly, but it was getting late and I needed to help my parents unpack. I bid them all good night and was about to go back to the manager's quarters when I suddenly remembered.

"Hey, Hank, what'd you mean by what you said earlier about Mr. Yao?" I asked. "That he was anything but all right?"

Hank's jaw locked.

"You'll soon find out, kid," Hank said. "The man has coal for a heart."