# THREE KEYS

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# ALSO BY KELLY YANG

Front Desk (Front Desk #1)

**For older readers:**

Parachutes

*To all the dreamers*

# CHAPTER 1

A very wise person once told me that there are two rollercoasters in America — one for the poor and one for the rich. I've only been on one of those rollercoasters, and I thought I was never going to get off. But as I watched my best friend, Lupe, decorate the Calivista Motel pool with silver and gold lights, a smile stretched across my face. The lights were the kind you put up at your house at Christmas. Even though it was the middle of August and the summer sun beat down on us, it sure *felt* like Christmas. We were owners now. We had bought the motel from Mr. Yao, and we were finally going to run it our way!

"A little to the left!" Mrs. T, one of the weeklies, called, pointing to the *BBQ at the Pool* sign. She and the other weeklies — Hank, Mrs. Q, Fred, and Billy Bob — were also helping set up. They were our regular customers at the motel, but they were so much more — they were family. Hank smiled at the sign. The barbecue was his

idea. It was part of his "friendlier and warmer" rebranding of the Calivista. And it was going to be *delicious*. We were having Hank's tangy-sweet baby back ribs, Fred's corn on the cob, and my mum's fried rice.

Hank adjusted the sign and we all stood back to admire it. Lupe's dad, José, gave a holler and a thumbs-up from the roof. I waved back at José. Ever since we took over the motel, he'd been working almost exclusively at the Calivista, which meant I'd gotten to hang out with Lupe all summer long.

My mum rushed out from the manager's quarters with a large cooler full of ice, with my dad trailing after her.

"Don't take that out so early," my dad cautioned. "The ice is going to melt!"

My mum placed the cooler beside the table with the napkins and drinks. "Then I'll just run out and get some more!" she said.

You'd think now that we were making more money, my parents would stop bickering. But every morning, my dad still pours the cooking oil he saved from the previous night's dinner into the breakfast pan, saying "Don't waste" in Chinese. And he still pulls a square from the toilet paper roll to wipe his nose, instead of using a Kleenex. It's like he doesn't believe any of this is real — that if he doesn't save every penny, it'll all disappear.

I walked over to the white plastic pool chairs where my dad sat and bent down next to him.

"We're on the good rollercoaster now, Dad," I told him. "Things are going to be different, you'll see."

He reached out and ruffled my hair.

Soon, the pool started filling up with guests. Besides the customers, my mum had invited a few of the immigrant investors who had chipped in to help buy the motel. She'd also invited some of the paper investors, the people who invested money but rarely came around. Instead, every month, we mailed them a cheque and a report. I *loved* writing the reports. As I squeezed by them, I heard them chatting about what a great summer it had been and how investing in the Calivista was the best decision they've ever made, and it made me so proud.

At the drinks and napkins table, a few of our customers were talking about the governor's race here in California.

"Have you seen the ads?" one of the guests, Mr. Dunkin (room 15), asked his neighbour, Mr. Miller (room 16). I looked over to see the reaction. Lately, you couldn't miss Governor Wilson on television. He was running for reelection against a woman, Kathleen Brown. His campaign ads showed people running across the US-Mexico border while a creepy, low voice bellowed, "THEY KEEP COMING." I couldn't stand the eerie music and the Darth Vader voice.

Mr. Miller put his baby back rib down and licked his gooey fingers. "I'll tell you something, if those illegals keep coming, there'll be nothin' left for the rest of us," he said.

I glared at them out of the side of my eyes. The term *illegals* was so mean, it always made me jerk backward whenever I heard it. I wanted to take his gooey baby back rib and stick it in his hair.

Instead, I looked around for my best friend, Lupe. She was up on the roof with her dad, watching the sunset. I waved and smiled at her, remembering the long, wonderful summer we'd had, all the late afternoon swims in the pool and game nights in Billy Bob's room. It was just like I'd written about in my essay for the Vermont motel contest.

"Mia!" Hank called to me from the grill. He was still in his mall security guard uniform, having just gotten off work. The hours were long at his job, but he was hopeful that a big promotion was just around the corner, which would mean he'd have more free time. "Hand me those napkins, will ya?" Hank asked me with a smile.

I got Hank a thick stack of napkins. As he grilled the ribs, I told him what I'd heard Mr. Miller say. The hickory smoke of the ribs mixed with the frustration in my nose.

"It's those awful ads," Hank said, frowning. He

brushed the ribs with his honey barbecue sauce. "They're scapegoating the immigrants for California's problems."

"*What*-goating?" I asked. I pictured a billy goat in the middle of the pool, bleating and splashing toward us.

"Scapegoating's when you blame someone else for things that go wrong, even if they had nothing to do with it," Hank explained. He adjusted his hat to block the lazy summer sun from his eyes.

"There's a word for that? I thought it was just called plain ol' mean," I said.

Hank chuckled.

As the ribs sizzled on the grill, I thought back to last year.

"Is it kind of like when we had to pay Mr. Yao for the broken washing machine?" I asked Hank, wincing a little at the memory. It had been a long, hard year, and sometimes I still got goosebumps when I thought about the many, many things Mr. Yao had docked our salary for.

"Exactly," Hank said, tapping the meat with his barbecue fork. "Put it this way: Governor Wilson has a very large broken washing machine, called the California economy, and now he needs someone to blame."

My mother waved at me from the other side of the pool. She and my dad were standing next to their friends, Uncle Zhang and Auntie Ling. I waved back and called,

"Be right there!" Then I turned to Hank and asked, "But why immigrants?"

He put his barbecue prong down and thought for a minute. Finally, he said, "Because it's easy to blame those in a weak spot."

As Hank returned to his barbecue, I thought about Lupe's two rollercoasters saying. It was bad enough to be stuck on the poor one without other people trying to make the ride even longer and *more* shaky. I stared into the blurry heat above the grill, my heart thumping.

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After all the guests left later that night, I found Lupe sitting on the stairs in the back of the motel. I took a seat next to her.

"Can you believe it's already the middle of August?" Lupe asked, leaning her head against my shoulder and smiling in the dreamy, sticky heat. We looked up at the bright full moon and listened to the fireworks going off at Disneyland, five miles away. We couldn't see them, but we could hear them every night. "I wish the summer would never end."

"Me too," I said. Lupe offered me a watermelon wedge from her paper plate, and I bit into it, the sweetness of the watermelon lingering on my tongue.

As I gazed up at the stars, I thought about how amazing this was. To be able to sit here and listen to the fireworks and not have to worry that Mr. Yao might drive over and yell at us to get back to work. Now instead of threats and harassment, we had a new credit card reader, a new vending machine, How to Navigate America classes for new immigrants on Wednesdays, hosted by Mrs. T and Mrs. Q, and Lucky Penny search nights on Tuesdays, organised by my dad.

My parents were no longer walking zombies, thanks to a sign up at the front office that Lupe and I made that said, *Catching some z's. Please come back in the morning! The front desk is open from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.*

The first night my parents put up that sign, they kept waking up at night, hearing customers in their heads. It was as though people were checking in between their right ear and their left ear. It took a week for them to accept that they were no longer nocturnal, but finally they started sleeping soundly all night long.

Lupe turned to me and asked, "We're still going to do this when school starts, right? Check people in together?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "Of course!" I loved working at the front desk with my best friend. *Best friend*. I rolled the words around in my mouth. They were words I never got to say before, having moved to four different

schools for six different grades. Now I got to say them whenever I wanted!

"Oh, I almost forgot," Lupe said, pulling a piece of paper from her pocket and handing it to me. "My dad had to go home early, but he said to give you guys this."

I opened the note. The words *Channel 624* and *Channel 249* were scribbled inside.

"They're the Chinese news channels," she said. "He finally managed to get them to work so your parents can watch the Chinese news!"

I grinned. "They'll be so excited! Tell him thanks!"

Lupe took her watermelon rind, held it up to her mouth, and beamed a gigantic green smile at me.

One of the guest room doors opened, and the sound of the *Channel 5 Evening News* spilled into the night. The words *illegal immigration* thundered from the room. I jerked back again. I never used to hear that term before. Now I heard it five times a day.

"Have you seen the ads on TV?" I turned to Lupe and asked.

Lupe's watermelon smile disappeared. She put her wedge down and asked, "What ads?" like she didn't know what I was talking about. Which was impossible. You'd have to be a Martian not to have seen them all summer.

"Don't worry, he's not going to win," I told her gently. I thought about telling her what Hank said about the goat named Scape.

Lupe wrapped her arms tightly around her knees and hunched into a ball. "So, you ready for school to start tomorrow?" she asked, changing the subject. "I hope we're in the same class again this year."

"Me too!"

"Hope we're not in the same class as Jason Yao," she added, making a face.

I laughed. "He's not that bad." Actually, I'd thought about Jason a few times this summer. I hadn't heard from him. I bet he went on a long fancy holiday with his parents, staying at one of those hotels with the huge breakfast buffets. I wished we could have one at the Calivista. I wondered if he thought about us as he munched on his chocolate croissants. I'd kind of hoped he'd call me. Then I could tell him how well we were doing.

There were a couple of days that summer when we had rented out every single room. That had never happened before. We even got to light up the *No Vacancy* sign! My dad let me flick the switch. As I lit the sign, I fantasised about Mr. Yao driving past, his face fuming with regret.

"Jason *is* that bad," Lupe insisted. Her face turned all red and I stared at her, half amused.

"He's changed a lot," I reminded her. "He was the one who helped us negotiate with Mr. Yao for the motel, remember?"

Still, Lupe shook her head. "People don't change."

I studied her, her hands squeezed tight into little fists around her knees, as Hank came running over.

"Mia! Lupe! Come quick! You guys gotta see this! We're on TV!"