



# ROOM TO DREAM

A **FRONT DESK** NOVEL

KELLY YANG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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**TO MY LAO YE, WHO TAUGHT  
ME TO DREAM BIG. I MISS YOU  
EVERY DAY.**

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# CHAPTER I

Silver strands of tinsel hung from our classroom Christmas tree, swaying slightly under the ceiling fan. Even though it was nearly December, it was still fairly warm in Anaheim—not enough for air conditioning but enough to keep the fan on. As our seventh-grade math teacher, Mrs. Beadle, handed out problem sets for us to do, I sat at my desk staring at the shimmery strands, wondering if I should get some for our little tree at the front desk of the Calivista Motel.

“Hey, Lupe, do you think we should get some tinsel—” I turned to my right and asked, then remembered. Lupe wasn’t in math with me this year. I kept forgetting. Thanks to all the studying she did with my mom over the summer, Lupe was now in Algebra 1, while Jason and I were in regular seventh-grade math. In fact, Lupe wasn’t in any of my classes at Anaheim Junior High this year.

I sighed, and Jason lifted his head. “You want some tinsel?” he asked. Before I could answer, he jumped out of his seat and lunged for the Christmas tree, nearly falling on top of it. All the kids shrieked and laughed.

“Take your seat!” Mrs. Beadle ordered him.

Jason muttered, “Sorry,” and went back to his desk, but not before making off with a fistful of tinsel. When Mrs. Beadle’s back was turned, he passed it to me. I giggled.

At least I had Jason in my classes this year.

Jason squished his legs under his desk. He had shot up like a bean sprout over the summer and now towered over me. His smile disappeared when he looked down at the problem sets Mrs. Beadle placed in front of him. “Not a quiz again,” he moaned.

“Jason, you’re in middle school now,” Mrs. Beadle said. “And you’ve known about this quiz all week.”

“But I’ve been busy cooking!” Jason replied.

Twice a week after school, Jason went to a cooking academy in nearby Orange. Sometimes after class, he came by the motel and let us taste his creations—Hawaiian peach mousse, tomato ricotta with sesame, barbecued butternut squash and choy sum. Every dish he made was *delicious*. His cooking teacher said he was one of the most talented junior chefs she'd ever taught. At the rate he was going, he'd be promoted to the elite cooking academy any day now!

But Mrs. Beadle shook her head. "Your extracurricular activities are just that. *Extracurricular*. They're not supposed to get in the way of your real subjects."

"Yeah, Jason," Bethany Brett chimed in. She was sitting in the row in front of us, wearing five necklaces and twirling them with her fingers. "Cooking's not a real subject. It's for old ladies."

Jason's face turned beet red as the class started snickering. Most of our classmates came from other elementary schools; they hadn't been to last year's cookout at Dale Elementary, where Jason's chef skills had impressed everyone. Bethany had been there, though.

"That's funny," I said to her. "I distinctly remember you gobbling up Jason's delicious braised pork belly and asking for seconds...."

"Let's get back to math," Mrs. Beadle urged.

I put a hand on Jason's arm, and we shared a look. Then, as Mrs. Beadle went back to her desk and started the timer on her clock, I got to work. Maybe if I did well on these quizzes, I'd get promoted to Algebra 1 too.

After class, Jason and I put our books back in our lockers and raced over to the eighth-grade side of campus, where Lupe's math class was. We found a spot over by the trees. I looked up at the tree roof. It made me miss the Kids for Kids club we had in elementary school.

Unfortunately, most of those kids had gone to different middle schools. Some had moved away. The ones who stayed suddenly had other interests, like computer club and hanging out by the bleachers with the cool girls.

Lupe and I tried hanging out with the cool girls too. But they had taken one look at us and scooted over to the other side of the bleachers. Lupe wasn't so bothered. But I wondered: What made them popular and not us?

"So how's algebra?" I asked Lupe.



Lupe reached into her bag of chicharrones.

“Good,” she said, munching on a chip. She handed some to me. Chicharrones were these spicy chips from Tijuana that melted and exploded in your mouth at the same time. Now that Lupe’s dad had received his papers from the immigration judge and Proposition 187 was overturned, Lupe’s family got to go back and forth freely from the US and Mexico—and bring all sorts of delicious snacks with them!

“Some of the stuff is pretty hard,” she added.

“You know if it gets too hard, you can always move back down with us!” I suggested eagerly.

Jason nodded. “*And* we have tinsel.”

Lupe chuckled. “It’s not *too* hard,” she insisted. “But I do miss you guys.”

I smiled at my best friend and reached for another chicharron. I gazed at it. It used to be that you could get chicharrones at Mr. Abayan’s convenience store. He always stocked his shelves with all kinds of snacks from Mexico and the Philippines. But his store got replaced by a 7-Eleven, and now you had to go all the way to Mexico to find chicharrones.

Lupe reached for her textbooks. “I’m going to the library to get started on my homework.”

“I’ll come with you!” I offered, getting up.

“No, it’s okay,” Lupe quickly said, backing away and hugging her books tightly. “I’ll catch up with you at the front desk!”

I watched as Lupe skipped over to the library, wondering why she didn’t want me to come along. Was she afraid I would distract her? I totally wouldn’t.

“So did you ask all the teachers for permission yet?” Jason asked, handing me one of his green-tea Pocky sticks.

“Just need English!” I told him as I bit into the Pocky. In a little over a week, my parents and I were finally going on our first Christmas vacation ever ... to China! I was so eager to see all my cousins and aunts and uncles again, I could hardly sit still at the front desk. Every day I put a big X on the calendar, counting down. The excitement—and nerves—jingled inside me. Would my cousin Shen still recognize me when I stepped off the plane? Would I recognize him?

“I can’t believe the teachers are letting you take a whole extra month off school,” Jason said.

Because the plane tickets were so expensive, and it’d been *forever* since we took a vacation, my parents wanted to go for a full six weeks. So far, all my teachers had said that was okay. “As long as I do my homework, they’re cool with it!”

“And the motel?”

“Lupe’s parents are covering for us.”

Jason’s eyes dropped to his Pocky. “Well, *I’m* going to miss you.”

I smiled. I knew Jason liked sitting next to me, especially in math, where he didn’t always get what the teacher was talking about. “I’ll be back soon, and I’ll bring you lots of numbing peppers and special spices!”

His face brightened. “And we’re still on for the movies next Saturday, before you go?”

“Of course!” As a Christmas treat, Jason, Lupe, and I were going to a movie and then dinner. Now that the economy was doing better, Jason’s dad’s businesses were flourishing, and Jason got his allowance back. And Lupe and I had our front desk money. Jason had the restaurant all picked out—a new place called Jade Zen. It was right next to the congee place my parents and I liked to go to on Sundays. And we were going to go see *Toy Story!*

I was so excited, I nearly blurted out that it’d be my first time watching a movie in an American theater. But I stopped myself just in time. There were some things I still didn’t want to tell Jason, even if I would’ve told Lupe in a heartbeat.

“It’s going to be amazing!” Jason beamed.

The bell rang for third period, and we got up. As we brushed the grass off our pants, Jason leaned over and awkwardly hugged me.

“Oh!” I said, surprised.

“Sorry,” he said, blushing. “I just ... I can’t wait for Saturday!”

• • •

Later in English class, Bethany Brett sat next to me, loudly chewing on her gum while Ms. Swann, our teacher, handed back our essays. I looked over at

Jason, who was similarly annoyed by our own Miss Violet Beauregarde.

“Da-Shawn, this is so good,” Ms. Swann gushed. Da-Shawn Wallace had moved to Anaheim from Connecticut a couple weeks before. An African American boy with braces and a Batman pencil case, he was the only person I knew who read more than me and Lupe. He even read sometimes under his desk when Ms. Swann wasn’t looking.

“The way you describe being lost at sea, I can *feel* every wave crashing, every drop of rain!”

“*Psst*,” Jason whispered. “I bet yours is better!”

I gazed over at Da-Shawn’s paper, curious to see what an A+ paper looked like, but he quickly put it away.

Ms. Swann had given me two As so far this year. She had a bulletin board up by the front of the classroom where each month she recognized the Most Creative Writer, Most Funny Writer, and Most Moving Writer. I hadn’t made the Most list yet, but I was hopeful that I was close. As she handed back my essay, I saw another A.

“All right, class, please put your stories away. It’s time for our whole-grade photo. Everyone head to the gym,” Ms. Swann said.

I looked at Jason. *That’s today?* I’d completely forgotten. I put my papers in my backpack and got in the single-file line to go to the gym. Jason took out a comb from his back pocket to straighten his hair.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Great,” I said, studying him. He’d missed a spot, and I reached up and patted a stray hair with my hand. For some reason, that made Jason blush.

As we walked inside the gym, I looked around for Lupe. We *had* to stand together. I found her in the front row.

“Hey!” I said, getting in the front row next to her.

“Did you know this was today?” Lupe asked.

“No, I forgot,” I said. I looked down at my jeans and T-shirt of a pickle that said *I’m Kind of a Big Dill*. Had I known our group picture was today, I would have picked another shirt. I gazed over at Bethany Brett, rearranging her five necklaces in front of her sweater. So *that’s* why she was wearing them.

Jason squeezed in the front row next to us. “Well, you totally look

awesome,” he assured me.

“Thanks.” I smiled. “We look awesome.”

The photographer, a white guy named Kyle who had a big button on his shirt that said *Smile with Teeth*, walked over to us.

“You guys need to move to the back row,” he told me, Jason, and Lupe.

We looked at him, confused. The people in the back row were a full head taller than us. Maybe Jason would fit in, but Lupe and I would be completely hidden.

“Can we just stay here?” I asked. “Please?”

I really wanted my parents to buy the picture this year. Every year, when we got the flyer to buy school photos, my mom always said they were too expensive. She’d cut out the small free sample pic and stick that on the refrigerator instead. Maybe if they saw me in the front row this year, they’d actually buy it!

“I’m afraid not,” Kyle the photographer said.

I looked around at all the other kids in the front row. The other kids were mostly white. Some were even taller than me and Lupe. But he wasn’t telling them to move.

“I’m trying to achieve a certain look here,” Kyle explained in frustration.

I furrowed my eyebrows. What was *that* supposed to mean?

Lupe tugged on my arm and said quietly, “It’s fine.”

Reluctantly, I followed her and Jason to the back row, frowning as Dillon Fischer blocked my whole face with his big neck. It just felt so unfair. After all the stuff we’d achieved—Lupe was practically taking high school math and I was a straight-A student—I felt like we’d earned the right to be front and center. But the photographer was still trying to hide us.

As Kyle the photographer told us to smile, I muttered to Lupe, “This stinks.”

“I know,” she said.

“Nah, it’s okay,” Jason said. “I don’t want to be front and center anyway.”

“But that’s not the point.” I turned to him. “We’re not *allowed* to be. There’s a difference.”

And why? Just because we weren’t blonde and blue-eyed and didn’t wear a million necklaces like Bethany?

• • •

After English class was over, I went up to Ms. Swann.

“How was the class picture?” she asked.

*Not great.*

“I didn’t get to stand where I wanted ...” I muttered.

Ms. Swann looked at me sympathetically. “That happens sometimes,” she said. “I remember when I was a kid I was always the shortest one. But don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll have a growth spurt soon!”

Yeah. I somehow doubted that would change things.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?”

I started telling her about our Christmas trip to China.

“China!” Ms. Swann cried. “That’s amazing! I’ve *always* wanted to go to China. Oh, I’m so jealous you’re going!”

I smiled—it was nice to know that not everyone in my school wanted me to hide my culture. Slowly, I explained how the tickets weren’t cheap and my parents rarely got a vacation, so I needed to take an additional four weeks off school.

Ms. Swann put a finger to her chin. “As long as you keep up with your English homework, that’s okay with me.” She glanced around her desk until her eyes landed on a blank notebook, which she handed me. “Fill this up with stories. I want you to write a journal entry on your experience, twice a week. Take me to China and really blow me away—will you do that?”

I promised her I would as I took the notebook. I couldn’t wait to show her around my hometown and make her see, taste, and *feel* everything. By the time I got back, I’d definitely earn my position on her Most board.

• • •

“Mom! Dad! I got permission from all my teachers!”

I burst into the front office after school, but my parents weren’t there—only Hank heard me shouting.

“These travel agents, they sure are snooty,” he said, sighing as he hung up the phone. “They keep saying we don’t have enough of a *brand*, so they won’t partner with us.”

Hank had been trying to get travel agents to work with the Calivista, as

part of his plan to take the motel to new heights.

“Why do we need a travel agency again?” Lupe asked, plopping down on one of the stools and putting her math homework on the front desk.

“Because they bring in lots of customers!” Hank said. “Let’s say you’re sitting at your house in Texas and you want to go to Disneyland. You call up your travel agent and they help you book your flight and your hotel. That could be us. We could be the hotel!”

I sighed, gazing over at the Disneyland poster on the wall, which was peeling at the edges now. Even though we were just five miles away, Lupe, Jason, and I still hadn’t been. We’d made a pact to go for sure this year. Maybe when I got back from China. I smiled at the thought. I couldn’t wait.

Gently, I took the tinsel Jason gave me out of my backpack and sprinkled it over our cute little Christmas tree.

“Hey, that looks good,” Lupe said.

“Thanks!” I smiled.

“We should get some ornaments too. Maybe a Mickey Mouse one ... I’ll try to find one at the dollar store!” Lupe said.

“That’ll be great! But we’ll get an official one—when we go to Disneyland.”

“For sure!”

A loud *BANG* interrupted us. It was coming from the construction work next door. Both the Topaz and the Lagoon were under renovation, curiously at the same time, making us the only motel on the block.

“What are they *doing* over there?” I asked, watching the tinsel shake on our little tree.

“Whatever it is, I hope they never finish,” Hank said. His eyes twinkled as he walked over and opened up the cash register. It was full of cash!

“Holy moly!” Lupe said.

“I know. Isn’t it great?” Hank beamed. “It’s been a full house since the Topaz and Lagoon closed.”

I grinned as I thumbed through the thick stack of registration forms.

Lupe gazed out the window at the Lagoon’s green mesh netting concealing their renovation, as Mrs. Davis walked into the front office.

“Well, I’m all done for the day! Just came in to grab my purse,” she said.

Hank got it from under the front desk, thanking Mrs. Davis for her help. Mrs. Davis was the cleaning professional from the local cleaning agency, Happy Clean. Now that my mom was studying full-time for her math teaching licensing exam, my dad needed help cleaning thirty rooms a day. Mrs. Davis was especially good at changing sheets, having worked in a nursing home before.

My dad walked in right behind her.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he said to Mrs. Davis. “I don’t know how I’d get all these rooms clean by myself.”

“Well, luckily you don’t have to,” Mrs. Davis said with a warm smile. “I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow.”

After Mrs. Davis left, I turned to my dad.

“Guess what? My teachers said I could go to China for the full six weeks!”

“That’s fantastic!” Dad said, patting the sweat off his hairline with a rag from his pocket.

Just then, my mom came walking out of the manager’s quarters to the front desk, holding a white envelope. Her hands were shaking.

“What is it?” Dad asked.

She peered up at us with big, watery eyes. “I did it! I passed my substitute teaching exam!”

Lupe and I jumped up and down, shrieking, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!” Dad took Mom into his arms and hugged her as Hank grabbed the phone to call the other weeklies. My mom had been studying so hard. And now her dream of being a teacher in America was finally coming true!

# CHAPTER 2

That night, we all gathered in the kitchen of the manager's quarters for a celebratory dinner. As my mom prepared kung pao chicken and spring rolls, Hank stood over the stove grilling up his signature saltine burgers. I turned to my dad.

"Was there any mail for me?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, there was," he said. "I put it in your room."

Just then, Lupe's mom and dad arrived with a pot full of tamales. Lupe stayed in the kitchen to help her dad, but I escaped to my room and quietly closed the door behind me. My heart thumped as I walked up to the envelope sitting on top of my dresser. Carefully, I tore it open. *Here goes.*

Dear Mia,

Thank you for submitting your work to the opinion section of the *Los Angeles Gazette*. The editors regret to say it does not suit the needs of our newspaper at this time, and we are unable to publish it. We wish you well, and we thank you for thinking of our newspaper.

Kind regards,  
The Editors  
*Los Angeles Gazette*

I blinked my eyes hard before a tear could escape. *Stop it*, I told myself. *Getting a rejection is normal, part of being a professional writer.*

Except it wasn't my first. It was my seventy-ninth.

Ever since the piece I wrote on Proposition 187 was in the *Los Angeles Times*, I'd been trying to get published again. At the library, I looked up the addresses of newspapers all over the country so I could mail them my opinion pieces. And all year, the editors from those papers mailed my letters right back. The rejections all said the same thing: My writing "didn't suit their



needs at this time,” they weren’t interested in the daily goings-on at the motel, and my stories weren’t serious enough.

I sat down on my chair with a heavy sigh, letting the *Gazette* letter fall from my hand to the floor.

The worst thing was, not a single person knew. Not Hank, not Lupe, not Jason. I hadn’t told them because I kept waiting and waiting for my luck to turn around. Now I was starting to think maybe I was just a one-hit wonder.

“Hey, Mia?” Lupe knocked on my door. “It’s time to eat!”

“Be right there!” I called.

I took the letter and stuffed it deep in my closet, with all my other hidden rejections.

Walking back into the kitchen, I watched my mom’s face melt as she bit into Hank’s burger. “This is the best burger I’ve ever had!” Mom proclaimed.

Hank chuckled. “Well, you deserve it! Congratulations!”

Mom pointed to the dark circles under her eyes. “I look like a panda, I’ve been studying so hard! I was so worried I wouldn’t pass.”

“I wasn’t worried for a second!” my dad said, holding a can of cream soda up for a toast. “To my brilliant wife, who as of today is officially on the main road!” He leaned over and kissed my mom on the cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Hear, hear!” we all said, and clinked soda cans.

Lupe reached for a spring roll as I helped myself to a tamale.

“What were you doing in your room for so long?” Lupe asked.

“Just homework,” I lied. Turning to my mom, I said brightly, “So, do you know where you’re going to be teaching?”

“The letter doesn’t say exactly, but it’ll be in the Anaheim Unified School District.” Her eyes flashed. “Wouldn’t it be amazing if I was *your* math teacher, Mia?”

I coughed, glancing over at Lupe. Bethany Brett would *love* to see that.

“Or mine,” Lupe said quickly. “I think you should be mine!”

My dad chuckled. “You’ve already got kids fighting to be in your class!”

“When do you start?” asked Mrs. Q, one of the weeklies.

“Right after we get back!” Mom grinned at me and Dad. “I can’t wait to see the look on my sisters’ faces when I tell them!”

Ever since my mom's sisters turned her down for money when we were trying to buy the motel two years ago, things had been a little tense. I was glad Mom had something great to tell them.

If only I had the same.

"Just think, maybe one of these days, we'll finally be able to buy one of the houses with a white picket fence we've been looking at!" Mom said.

I nodded eagerly. After our weekly Sunday breakfast at the congee shop, my parents and I drove to open houses. We didn't have enough money to buy a house yet, but my mom said it was important to visualize what we wanted to achieve. Maybe one day soon, we wouldn't just visualize—we'd actually achieve!

The front office doorbell rang. Dad got up to go deal with the customer while Hank updated everyone on the travel agency project.

"We'll find something," José encouraged him. "And even if we don't partner with a travel agency, we're doing fine. We've been killing it!"

"Because the Topaz and the Lagoon are both closed. But when they reopen ..." Hank shook his head.

Billy Bob swatted the concern away. "When they reopen, you'll still have to drive by us to get to them. Remember, in real estate, it's location, location, location!"

"Yup!" I seconded. I'd heard that expression from several real estate agents at open houses.

Mom craned her neck, looking toward the front office. "What's taking him so long? The food's getting cold."

"I'll go get him!" Hank said.

Billy Bob clicked on the television to check the latest scores from the Dodgers game.

"What'd I miss?" my dad asked, sitting back down at the kitchen table. He looked around for the sweet chili dipping sauce to dip the spring rolls in.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't have time to go to 99 Ranch to buy the chili sauce this week," Mom said.

"Don't worry about it. I can run over to the Asian Mart after dinner and get some," Dad said, referring to a tiny store by the library that sold Asian spices and sauces. Jason also liked going there.

“I tried going there, but it was closed,” Mom said.

My dad raised his eyebrows. “Closed, really?” he asked. He put his chopsticks down. “I hope they didn’t move.”

Mrs. T leaned in. “Have you noticed all the shops changing in our neighborhood?”

Mrs. Q nodded, and I realized I’d noticed too. There was Mr. Abayan’s convenience store, which was now a 7-Eleven; the hair salon with the giant scissors in the window by the high school, which was now a Supercuts; and my favorite stationery store, where I got my sparkly green pencil. It closed because it couldn’t compete with the Office Depot.

Hank walked back in.

“All good?” Dad asked. “What room did you give her?”

Hank shook his head. “It was so weird. Once I took over, she changed her mind. Didn’t want to stay anymore.”

“Didn’t want to stay?” Dad asked.

In the background, the evening news took over from the baseball game.

“Despite efforts to improve racial tensions,” the anchorman was saying, “polls show that since the OJ Simpson verdict, race relations have worsened across the country. Many Americans feel that OJ Simpson, a Black man, should have gone to jail for the alleged murder of two white people.”

Fred got up and turned off the TV, while Hank sank in his chair.

“Every time something like that happens,” he said, pointing at the TV, “it’s like a presumption of guilt that extends to all us Black folks.” Hank rubbed his weary eyes. “I’m just so tired of it.”

“Me too,” I said. Gently, I told everyone what happened with the photographer at school.

“That’s horrible!” Mrs. Q said.

“I’m going to call up the school tomorrow and make them retake the picture!” Mrs. Garcia said, fuming.

“No, please don’t, Mom,” Lupe pleaded. “Some of the other kids already think it’s weird that I’m in algebra.”

“Why’s that weird?” Mrs. Garcia asked.

Hank shook his head. “Man, the systemic racism in this country ...”

Billy Bob put a hand on Hank’s shoulder.

“Maybe I need a vacation,” Hank murmured.

Just then, a wild idea came into my head.

“Hey, why don’t you come with us to China?” I asked. I looked over at Mom and Dad, who nodded eagerly.

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Dad said.

“No, no, I was just kidding. I’ll be fine,” Hank insisted.

“But why *not*?” I asked him. “You haven’t had a vacation in years. And you’ll *love* it there! You can meet my family!”

“Think of all the great food you’ll eat!” my dad added.

“And the sights you’ll see!” Mrs. T hollered. “The Great Wall of China!”

“The Forbidden City!” Mrs. Q added.

“But what about the motel?” Hank asked.

José smiled. “We’ll take good care of it. Don’t you worry, amigo.”

“That’s right!” Mrs. Garcia said. “You don’t have to worry about a thing!”

Hank looked at me and my parents. “Tickets must cost a fortune,” he said. “And I don’t have a visa.”

“You can get a visa next week at the Chinese consulate!” Dad said. “I’ll take you!”

“And I’ll bet you can get some cheap last-minute fares too, if you go to the right travel agent,” Mom said.

“Don’t get me started on travel agents!” Hank replied, and we all laughed. Turning to José, Hank asked, “Are you sure you guys are going to be okay without me?”

“We’ll be fine!”

Then Hank turned to Lupe. “Don’t forget to hang the special stockings on each guest room’s door at Christmas. With a little chocolate and card inside?”

Lupe crossed her arms. “Hey, I work here too, remember?” she asked. “I got this!”

Hank laughed as Dad slapped his hand on the table.

“That settles it!” he announced.

I grabbed Hank’s hand. “Hank!!! You’re going to China!!!” I shrieked.