



TOP STORY

A **FRONT DESK** NOVEL

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CHAPTER I

The crisp winter Bay Area wind hugged us as we got out of the car. Our old Chevy had heaved like an elephant all through California's Central Valley, but somehow, we made it, all the way from Anaheim to Chinatown, San Francisco!

I'd never been to Northern California before. I thanked my lucky stars for this dream opportunity wrapped in a Christmas vacation! I was here for journalism camp at one of the most prestigious papers in the country: the *San Francisco Tribune*!

"C'mon, Lupe!" I cried to my best friend as I climbed out of the Chevy and turned in a circle, trying to see all of Chinatown at once. "I want to check out how far it is from here to the newsroom!"

"Trying! This backpack won't budge," Lupe called from the trunk, where she was clenching her teeth and pulling on the thin straps of her bag.

Lupe had come with us so she could compete in the Math Cup state championships in Berkeley, a few cities farther up the coast. Our teachers had let us each take an extra week off school to pursue our passions.

I chuckled. "Every math book in the Anaheim Public Library is crying *ow!*" I teased, helping her heave the bag onto the sidewalk. She'd brought along so many books, her backpack was the size of a sofa.

I pulled my own suitcase out and we gazed up at the Golden Inn. Solid brick, with tall windows, it sat on the corner of Jackson Street. It looked like the Calivista back home, except more vertical. Like if you took all of our motel's rooms and stacked them on top of one another, like a Toblerone chocolate bar shooting straight up into the fog, with a thin, zigzagging fire escape running down its side.

It faced a building with a pagoda tower roof, and up and down the block, streetlamps with steel dragons twirled below red lanterns.

"*Whooooaaa*," I breathed. "What *is* this place?"

"It's like a whole other country!" Lupe agreed.

"Isn't it amazing?" Mom asked, walking back from the parking meter she'd just fed with a handful of coins. "It's the oldest Chinatown in the United States! Proud home to Chinese immigrants since the Gold Rush!"

My eyes feasted on the Chinese characters on the street signs, and on the dancing red lanterns swinging side by side with Christmas lights. I smiled and waved at all the aunties and uncles walking past, buying groceries in tiny shops and carrying wrapped gifts.

I inhaled deeply, welcoming the scents of winter melon, oolong tea, and the hopes and dreams of a thousand immigrants.

I couldn't *wait* to write about this place! I grinned, thinking of the stories I'd uncover, and hopefully get the *Tribune* to publish!

That was my mission for journalism camp: to convince a national paper that Asian American stories were worth covering *all the time*, not just during special occasions, like the Women's World Cup.

My *other* mission was for me and Lupe to finally have some fun! We'd both worked so hard to get to where we were. But we rarely had

time to kick back and relax. On the last day of school before break, I was excitedly talking about camp, and my classmate Stuart rolled his eyes.

“Geez, Mia, don’t you ever just chill?” he’d asked.

“No, Stu,” I’d snapped. “I don’t *just chill.*”

I’d been a little angry and offended by the comment, but a part of me was also curious. What was it like to chill? Could we finally try it in these city streets? It sure *felt* chilly in San Francisco.

“Can you believe these twenty-four square blocks were all the early Chinese immigrants had?” Mom asked us. “They had to do everything here. Their banking, buying their groceries, finding a job, raising their kids.” She put her arms around me and Lupe. “All in this tiny slice of San Francisco.”

“At one point, all *we* had was a tiny maid cart and the front office,” I reminded her.

“And some cable tools in an old pickup truck,” Lupe added with a smile.

I bumped my fist with hers. Now look at us! With that truck, Lupe’s dad had built a successful business. He and Lupe’s mom were on a cruise right now—their first vacation in forever—off the Gulf of Mexico. They’d booked it ages ago, before Lupe found out she was going to be in the Math Cup championships. Lupe didn’t want them to waste their tickets, and since my mom would be with the Math Cup team the whole time, the Garcias decided to go, just the two of them.

My dad was back home, minding our motel and painting our new house, which we bought with our hard-earned savings. Mom was pursuing her dream of teaching math in a high school, and I

was going to show a national newsroom what immigrant dreams were made out of!

Not bad for a bike, huh? I almost said to Mom. It was a million years ago when she first remarked that my English language skills made me a bike—while all the white kids were cars.

That comment had hurt my feelings.

A lot.

But I'd kept writing, and I kept fighting for my dream. And now I was walking, living proof that you don't have to be born with a language to write at a national level.

Mom turned to us. "I'm so proud of you two. You've both broken barriers to get to where you are. When you get to your competition and your camp tomorrow, I want you to think of all the immigrants who walked before you and were told their dream was too big, their value too small. And you *show them*, you hear?"

I felt myself stand even taller, my heart swelling with pride.

"Yes, ma'am!" Lupe and I shouted.

"There might be people who don't believe you can do it," Mom added gently. She rested a soft hand on Lupe's shoulder and added, "And memories that distract you."

I bit my lip, gazing at my friend.

Something had happened to Lupe right before we left. Something so horrible, she never wanted to talk about it again.

Right before we left for San Francisco, Lupe had finally mustered the courage to tell her friend and Math Cup teammate, Allie, that she liked her. *Like*-liked her.

Lupe knew that Allie might not feel the same way, but she had to be honest about her feelings. But Allie's response was worse than

anything we could've expected: She said that Lupe couldn't possibly know she was gay, because a thirteen-year-old was too young to know that kind of thing.

Lupe was mortified. As if that wasn't bad enough, Allie then announced that she and Ethan were dating! Ethan is on the Math Cup team too, so Lupe won't be able to avoid seeing them together.

It will take every ounce of willpower for Lupe to stay focused throughout the competition. At least she gets to stay with us in Chinatown, while the rest of the team and their parents stay in Berkeley. Mom said she chose the Golden Inn because it's much cheaper, but I know she also wanted to give Lupe some space.

Now, Lupe was staring straight ahead, a determined look on her face.

"Nothing's going to distract me," she said quietly. "I'll show her."

"That's the spirit!" Mom turned to me. "And you, Mia—there might be some difficult bigwigs in that newsroom."

I put a hand to my hip and gave her my best Simba I-laugh-in-the-face-of-danger "Ha!"

Mom smiled but insisted, "I'm serious! Big organization like that? There's bound to be one or two thorns. And what are we going to say to those folks?"

"We're going to say *bring it!*" I gazed up at the towering green-and-red roof across the street. "It's going to take a pagoda tower to knock us off our game!"

"Yes it will!" Mom chuckled. "Now come on, let's go check out our rooms!"

Lupe and I grinned at each other. We were finally going to see what it was like to stay in a motel as *guests!*