



ROOM^{TO} DREAM

A **FRONT DESK** NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

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.