Author’s Note

Many of the events in *Front Desk* are based on reality. Growing up, I helped my parents manage several motels in California from when I was eight years old to when I was twelve years old.

As a kid, I both loved and feared the front desk. I loved the thrill of working, the fact that I could ask an adult for their ID and they’d have to give it to me. I was also petrified at
night. I would go to sleep with this choking, painful anxiety, not knowing what might happen in the middle of the night. (The part about Mia’s mom getting beaten up really happened to my own mother.) Would both my parents still be there in the morning when I woke up?

At school, I couldn’t talk about it with any of my friends. How could I explain to them that my parents came to the United States with only $200 in their pocket? That for the first year, I slept on a mattress we pulled out of the Dumpster, hoping my dreams greeted me before the stench did.

I also couldn’t explain the love and hope that grew out of poverty. How much I bonded with the weeklies. How we watched out for one another and celebrated the joys together, however small. How my parents hid fellow immigrants from the boss (and used a blue baseball cap on the front desk as the secret sign!). How a pair of stray cats had kittens on the back stairwell and we hid the kittens in the rooms too. How my dad made soup for the customers when they weren’t feeling well.

How we became a family.

Our new family helped us get through the loneliness and frustration of our situation, the fact that we left behind our friends and family in China, thinking we were going to a better land, only to see our friends and family get rich back home in a way no one could have ever foreseen.

There were 536,000 immigrants from mainland China living in the United States in 1990.¹ Unlike the Chinese immigrants who came before them, the post-1965 Chinese immigrants were predominately skilled. They were highly
educated, leaving behind good careers. They took a bet that China was not going to change. They were wrong.

Many of them left with very little money because China was still fairly communist in the ’80s and early ’90s. China has, of course, modernized greatly since then. There is no longer the one child policy (now there’s the two child policy) and apartments in Beijing and Shanghai now cost several million US dollars (and come with private showers!). But in 1990, China’s per capita GDP was only US$317. Once in the United States, these immigrants struggled to survive, working long, excruciating hours in manual labor jobs for very little pay. The median annual income in 1989 for Chinese immigrants in the United States was only $8,000—lower than that of any other immigrant group.

This unique set of circumstances made these immigrants particularly vulnerable to exploitation and hardship. No group of Chinese immigrants before or since came with quite so little and gave up quite so much.

Later, some of these immigrants would go back to China and not recognize the country they left. They would not recognize their brothers and sisters, in their designer clothes and handbags. Their brothers and sisters would not recognize them. Neither would the new Chinese immigrants, who would arrive in business class and not understand why anybody would ever turn to the loan sharks.

I grew up listening to the stories of these immigrants, stories that brought tears to my eyes and chilled the air in my lungs. I’ll never forget when my mom’s friend came to stay with us and confessed he worked eighteen-hour days and
slept in his boss’s basement because his boss took away his passport and ID. I stayed up all night writing his boss a letter. Though I was just a kid, my letter scared the boss and my mom’s friend was freed.

I hope in telling these stories, these immigrants’ struggles and sacrifices will not be forgotten. *They* will not be forgotten.

And to the nearly twenty million immigrant children currently living in the United States (30 percent of whom are living at or below poverty), I hope this book brings some comfort and hope. You are not alone. Somewhere out there, someone in the universe understands exactly what you’re going through, including all the fears swirling in your mind or your parents’ minds that you’re just a bike. You are NOT a bike.

Finally, I hope that through this book, more people will understand the importance of tolerance and diversity. The owner of one of the motels we managed told us not to rent to African Americans, saying they were dangerous. This infuriated us, and we did not listen. To this day, my family and I are forever grateful to the many, many wonderful people from all different backgrounds who made us feel welcome in our new country and helped us in times of need.

Often during tough times, the first instinct is to exclude. But this book is about what happens when you include, when, despite all your suffering and your heartache, you still wake up every morning and look out at the world with fresh, curious eyes.

