



Dear Reader,



When I was younger, I was thoroughly convinced I was unlikable.


I would never be like my charming older cousins or my adorable younger sister. And I didn't make friends as easily as my mother did, either. It bothered me. It made me hungry for reassurance—either that one day I could become what they were, or that there was hope for awkward, grumpy, unlikable girls to find their place, too.

As always, I turned to books for solace and guidance. And as always, my books gave me what I needed: unlikable girls. Sophie Hatter grousing her way into the house of a handsome wizard. Meg Murry finding love and acceptance while being an ordinary teenage mess. And Mary Lennox. Mary was who I needed most: the patron saint of prickly girls with sharp tongues. Girls who always later regret their cutting words; who are bossy and brash and pretend they don't care that they don't have a friend in the world (but want friends so, so badly). Girls like me.

But Mary was different from me in one important way. She wasn't brown. And it is much harder in this world to be an “unlikable” brown girl. Much harder to expect love and acceptance and respect when the world seems barely able to tolerate you—even when you're cheerful and smiling and grateful just for your presence to be endured.

That is one reason my heart drew me toward retelling *The Secret Garden*: giving girls like me, at the age they need it most, the chance to have that blissful experience of acceptance. The chance to be seen for what they are—prickly, grumpy, but in desperate need of a hug underneath it all—and to thrive. Making friends. Being loved.

All they need—all I needed—was a safe place to bloom.

I hope this book is that place for them, and for you. I hope that when you turn its pages, you blossom into everything wonderful and perfect within you.  Everything that you already are, always have been, and always will be.

Sincerely,



Karuna Riazi

