

Dear Reader,

When the global pandemic began in the spring of 2020, the idea of writing a middle grade novel wasn't even a blip on my radar. But as incidents of anti-Asian hate grew, my identity, my sense of belonging, even the personal safety of myself and my family, became threatened in a way that shook me to my core. It felt like I wasn't being seen as an individual, but rather as a stereotype who wasn't important enough to defend and protect. In my anxiety, I needed joy, reassurance, and—most importantly—hope.

So I retreated to the world of children's books, reading to escape. To my astonishment, I discovered many more Asian American characters in the books of today than when I was a child reading *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* over and over again and wishing I could grow up to be Claudia Kishi. The wonderful characters I fell in love with are joyful, funny kids chasing big dreams with big hearts. They just happen to eat with forks *and* chopsticks, drink soda *and* boba tea, speak English *and* a second language.

With our world on lockdown, Pearl Li came to life. She's designed to be strong and sensitive, thoughtful and impulsive, creative and calculating. She wants unconditional love and acceptance from family, support from

friends, and a place in a world that sees her entire, multifaceted self—as an American, a Taiwanese, an Asian, a creator, a techie, an entrepreneur, and a daughter, a sister, and a loyal friend. This book exists to celebrate how it's exactly those complex layers of identity that make each and every one of us shine as brightly as we do.

And so, to all the kids out there who want the same things Pearl does, may you walk away from this book with at least one message—that you are seen. And you are important.

With all the hope in my heart,
Nicole Chen