

Dear Reader,

I didn't want to write about race issues.

As a kid, I wanted to be an author, but my parents told me that writing was a hobby, not a career, so I had better figure out a real day job. Nevertheless, I spent a lot of my free time scribbling in notebooks, dreaming about new stories. I wrote historical fiction and A LOT of fan fiction. At the age of eighteen, I started taking my original fiction more seriously. I wrote high fantasy, urban fantasy, and eventually, I hit my stride around unpublished novel three or four, finding my voice in contemporary.

In all that time, I always wrote white protagonists.

Why? I guess it felt too honest and too private, uncomfortable and raw to write about my own identity. I didn't want to be known as an author who wrote about "race issues." I just wanted to be known as an author who wrote well. And I wasn't really sure what I had to say. I grew up in the Midwest, mostly among white people, and I had a happy childhood. I loved my hometown. It wasn't perfect, but it was good.

But then the 2016 election happened. I felt restless and sad, and it was impossible not to think about the long procession of white books I had written. I was living on the East Coast. I wanted to write something personal. Something that took me back home and allowed me to explore the emotions I didn't always like. This story came to me in early 2017, after I saw a news article about an Asian American family whose garage had been spray-painted with the word *Chink*. I thought about all the times I had been called a Chink, and how I had been torn between feeling like I needed to just "get over it" and wanting

to go on a rampage. That's how I came up with the characters of Margaret and Annalie—the two sides of me that I struggled with my whole life.

Margaret and Annalie are also biracial. While it isn't an identity I share, their internal conflict reflects a duality I relate to deeply as well. Once when I was a teen having a fight with my mom about the cultural gap we had between us, I screamed at her that I was an American, and she told me, "No matter how long you live here in the United States, how good your English is, everyone will see your Chinese face. To them, you will be Chinese." That cut me so deeply, and I think about it to this day: the identity you choose, and the one the world bestows upon you. The dissonance it can cause, in one direction or the other.

In the end, this book is about race. But it is also about love. Loving people and loving places. Ultimately, I wanted to tell the story of how I felt in 2016—the feeling of loving a place that has suddenly transformed, before my very eyes, to somewhere that feels hostile and unknown. And finding a way back to that love, even if it's changed.

I don't always know exactly what to say about the complicated, painful issues we face today as a society. But I wrote this book, and I hope it reflects my heart.

With love,

XiXi