COUNTERFEIT

A NOVEL

REESE'S BOOK CLUB

KIRSTIN CHEN

"Addictive. . . . A glittering, provocative read."
—JANICE Y. K. LEE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Expatriates*

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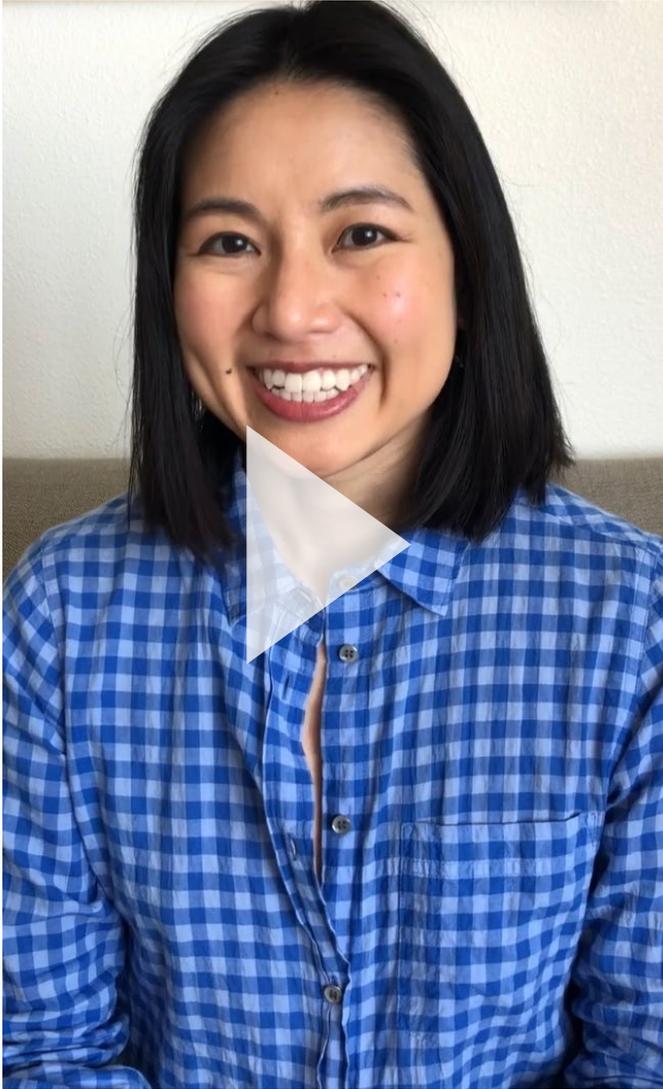
A Message
from
KIRSTIN
CHEN

BEHIND THE BOOK

In 2016, I was working on my second novel, a weighty historical drama set in 1950's southern China, when I made a joke that would reshape the next five years of my writing life. That day, after a particularly grueling stretch of research, I turned to my spouse and vowed that the next thing I wrote would require zero research and would therefore have to be about the only topic I was already an expert in: designer handbags. He laughed. I laughed. We thought nothing more of it.

A few months later, I came across an article in The Washington Post about a con artist who had created a seemingly foolproof counterfeit handbag scheme, a scheme so perfect it belonged in a novel. With that, my new book began to take shape.

Almost at once I discovered the joke was on me: while I was indeed an armchair expert on designer handbags, I knew nothing about their fake counterparts. And so, I obtained a research grant and set off for the city of Guangzhou, the leather goods capital of China. My first stop was the Baiyun World Leather Trading Center, one of the country's five largest wholesale markets, all two-hundred-square-feet of which is devoted to replica designer handbags. Nearly 1,200 tiny, fluorescent-lit shops pack this hulking shopping mall. I peered into one after another at the handbags crammed onto shelves like grocery cans, a compilation of the luxury industry's greatest hits: the Gucci Dionysus next to the Fendi Baguette next to the Louis Vuitton Speedy.

It was in one of these stores that I first held a coral Hermès Kelly "superfake"— purported to be at least 98% identical to the real thing. The price tag? $1,200, which is about a tenth of what someone would be charged at an Hermès boutique. As far as I could tell, the only thing missing from the replica was the Hermès stamp, which the sales associate told me could only be added after I'd paid for it— some sort of insurance policy against police raids.

In the neighboring city of Dongguan, I toured a luxury handbag factory that made bags for several well-known American and European designers. Across the border in Hong Kong, I consulted with an IP lawyer who specialized in copyright infringement in China, and who informed me, pointedly, that if the international brands didn't try to cut costs by dividing their manufacturing among the very cheapest factories, they might maintain better control of their blueprints.

Brimming with this new knowledge, I came home to build my story of a strait-laced, rule abiding Asian American lawyer who gets pulled into her bold, enigmatic friend's counterfeit handbag scheme. Again, I returned to that article in the Post, its treasure trove of details. One reason the real-life female con artist was so successful, I imagined (aside from the fact that she had access to high-quality knockoffs), was because she was an Asian preschool teacher, and therefore the unlikeliest of criminals. This got me thinking about my characters and the myth of the model minority—the stereotype that Asian Americans are polite, submissive, lawful, and have achieved high levels of success through a combination of innate talent and hard work. One might say, well what's so bad about that? These are all positive traits. But the myth not only erases differences among individuals and pits people of color against each other, it also furthers the idea of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners who must continually prove their "Americanness."

I worked on *Counterfeit* through the first year of the pandemic, during which I saw how quickly Asian Americans could morph from "model minority" to a contaminated people responsible for spreading the "Chinese flu". This experience only sharpened the urgency of my story. The myth of the model minority marks the lives of both my characters, and its lies and limitations are what ultimately push them to thwart the system and build their own version of the American Dream.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Before reading *Counterfeit*, how much knowledge did you have about how the handbag manufacturing business operated? Has this book illuminated the specifics of the industry in any surprising ways?

2. Although we never see or hear from the detective Ava is confessing to directly, were you able to grasp any character attributes about this person? Did you feel, as the reader, that you were being invited to be the arbiter of legitimacy in Ava's story?

3. Consider the emphasis on branding in fashion. Do you find that luxury brands are always synonymous with quality? Are you loyal to any brands, and if so, why?

4. What do you think a strong friendship requires? Are Winnie and Ava good friends for each other? How did you initially interpret their relationship, and how did your impression change as the novel progressed?

5. Winnie and Ava discuss the labor conditions in brand name factories. Do consumers have a responsibility to ensure the ethical production of products they purchase? Do you think most consumers care?

6. How do Winnie and Ava contend with the model minority stereotype that exists for the AAPI community in the United States? How do they take advantage of it?

7. How did your impression of Boss Mak shift over the course of the novel? How do you perceive his relationship with Winnie? Did you feel any sympathy for him at any point?

8. Did you see the main twist in the novel coming? How did your understanding of the story change after the reveal?

9. After the events of the novel, how do you see Ava's and Winnie's lives progressing? Have they been irrevocably changed by their experiences within these pages?

10. Does the title of the novel, *Counterfeit*, refer to more than just knockoff handbags? What else could the title pertain to?

PLAYLIST

to songs compiled by the author, themed to her novel.

"Your Best American Girl" by Mitski
"Selfless" by The Strokes
"Fake Empire" by The National
"Nothing New" by Taylor Swift
"This Life" by Vampire Weekend
"Paprika" by Japanese Breakfast
"New Normal" by Caroline Polachek
"Impromptu No. 3 in G-flat" by Franz Schubert
"Guitar" by Tracey Thorn
"Mr. November" by The National
"the last great american dynasty" by Taylor Swift
"Back in My Body" by Maggie Rogers
"Queen of the Rodeo" by Orville Peck
"California Kids" by Weezer
"Good as Hell" by Lizzo
"Little French Song" by Carla Bruni