



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS



PAOLA SANTIAGO AND THE RIVER OF TEARS



TEHLOR KAY MEJIA



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*To all the women (here and gone) whose stories, myths,
and superstitions have shaped my world*

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Acknowledgments

About the Authors

DON'T GO NEAR THE WATER

When I was a kid growing up in Texas, I was terrified of going into deep water. That wasn't just because the movie *Jaws* had freaked me out. (Although, yes, that giant robotic shark had scared the Twizzlers out of me.)

Worse: I had grown up listening to campfire stories about La Llorona, the weeping ghost who had drowned her own children in a river and was condemned to wander the riverbanks for eternity, looking for their bodies. If she happened to come across a living child at the river, well...she might claim you as her own and pull you under.

Whenever my family camped near the river, I would hear strange wailing sounds at night. I'd huddle deeper inside my sleeping bag. The next morning, I sometimes found heavy tracks in the mud, as if made by dragging, shuffling zombie feet. I was sure La Llorona had been on the prowl, looking for someone like me to drag into the cold, murky depths. Yeah, I had a fun childhood. Thanks for asking.

That's one reason I'm so excited to share Tehlor Kay Mejia's *Paola Santiago and the River of Tears* with you. She gives us a brand-new take on the ancient folktale of La Llorona, and I want you to read it so you can be as terrified as I was!

To be fair, our hero, Paola Santiago, is a lot braver than I was at her age. She's got a scientific mind, and she doesn't believe in old folk legends like La Llorona...despite the fact that she has suffered from horrible nightmares about the nearby Gila River her whole life, and even though her mom is always warning her about evil spirits and lighting velita candles to keep her safe. Ghosts aren't real. Are they? Her mom is just spouting silly

superstitions. Right?

Then, when something terrible happens at the river—something that could shatter Pao’s entire life and the lives of her two best friends—Paola starts to wonder if science will be enough to figure out the mystery.

This story is chock-full of suspense and fantastical elements, but it’s more than just a page-turner. I love *Paola Santiago* because the characters are so relatable. Have you ever struggled with loving your parents while also being mortally embarrassed by them? Have you ever been jealous of a best friend? Have you ever secretly *crushed* on a friend? Paola’s got *all* these problems and more. She’s smart and courageous, but she’s also a bubbling stew pot of conflicting emotions about herself, her friends, and her family. Does she have what it takes to handle all that *and* confront the truth about the strange disappearances that have been happening around town? You’re about to find out!

I’m really envious of you, reading this book for the first time. You’re going to make some lifelong friends in Paola, Emma, Dante, and the rest of the marvelous characters. So put another log on the campfire, guys. Roast some s’mores. Get ready to laugh and enjoy and maybe even shiver in fear at the story you’re about to hear. But whatever you do...don’t go near the water.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Lindan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "R".



ONE

Algae Again

It was 118 degrees in Silver Springs, Arizona, and the Gila River was thick with algae. But Paola was careful to keep that observation to herself. The last time she'd mentioned algae in front of her best friend Dante, he'd shoved a gummy worm up her nose.

Algae was green and slimy. It stuck to your feet when you stepped into the wrong part of the swimming hole. It smelled awful. It made the river look weird and alien when the water got too low. But when processed and extracted and purified, an acre of it could create ten thousand gallons of usable biofuel.

And wasn't that awesome enough to make up for its general ickiness?

Aware of Dante and her other best friend, Emma, sitting on the picnic blanket on either side of her, Pao didn't speak aloud the wonders of algae. Sometimes she thought there were still granules of sour sugar from that gummy worm slowly making their way to her brain through her nasal cavity. There was a lot of candy spread out before them today, and Pao didn't want to find out what other varieties would feel like in her nostrils.

Shuddering, she kept her daydreams private for now.

In Silver Springs, the place where Pao was unfortunate enough to have lived since she was four years old, there wasn't much to do *but* daydream. In fact, she had become somewhat of a pro.

Sometimes she pondered algae or other fuel experiments, sometimes

which kind of robot could best handle the unpredictable topography of Mars, sometimes the latest rocket launch and where it was headed. But Pao's spacey-ness didn't discriminate. She'd also been caught drifting off about her favorite graphic novel series, double-chocolate sundaes, and how unfair it was that her mom wouldn't let her get a dog. (Spoiler alert: It was really, really unfair.)

The thought of dogs had her pondering the specifics of certain breeds again, and she was barely aware of Dante and Emma's banter beside her until it was too late.

"Earth to Pao!" said Dante on her left, his hand inching dangerously close to a bag of Milk Duds, like he could tell she was silently breaking their no-algae agreement.

"You might have better luck with '*Mars to Pao.*'" Emma giggled on her right.

Pao let today's gloopy green daydreams float away into the sherbet-colored sky and sat up to face her two friends, smiling in an *I know I'm weird but you love me anyway, right?* kind of way.

"What did I miss?" she asked.

"Best superhero weapons," Emma said. "We were debating Captain America's shield versus Thor's hammer."

"Ah, sorry," Pao said. "But either way, you know I don't like weapons that defy physics. It's cheating."

Emma smiled and shook her head, her freckles standing out against her pink cheeks, her hair sandy and glossy, hanging in two curtains on either side of her face. Beside her, Dante rolled his eyes and huffed, his black hair flopping into his eyes. He tossed it off his face with a flick of his head, a move he'd learned from the older boys on his soccer team, and Pao was feeling so magnanimous she didn't even tease him for doing it.

"Not everything has to be scientifically accurate, Pao," he said, making her regret her mercy. "It's summer—can we just forget about school stuff for, like, three seconds?"

"We can't afford to. The polar ice caps are melting, Dante," Pao said witheringly. "Coral reefs are dying by the acre. The ozone—"

"Okay, okay, I get it," he said. "All science, no fun."

He saluted, and Pao, feeling bad for being a stick-in-the-mud, tossed a Cheeto at him and stuck out her tongue.

It feels like it's always been the three of us, Pao thought as Dante ate the

Cheeto and then Emma began trying to toss Skittles into his mouth. But it had been Dante and Pao first, long before Emma moved into town two years ago.

Dante had been Pao's neighbor since they were four, when her dad (whom Pao barely remembered) had left for good and her mom had been forced to move them into a run-down apartment complex at the edge of the desert.

Aside from sporadic birthday cards from her father (never with money inside, and only sometimes *on* her actual birthday), it had been just Pao and her mom for the past eight years.

In the beginning, her mom had tried to put up a brave front, but on several occasions, Pao had spied her crying out on the patio. One time Dante's abuela heard the sobbing, and she immediately insisted on having Pao and her mom over for dinner that night. And then the next night. And the next. Every evening for weeks Señora Mata had made rib-sticking feasts while Dante and Pao eyed each other warily across the shag-carpeted living room.

But then came the day when, as the kitchen filled with the smell of arroz con pollo, Dante held out a die-cast metal spaceship for Pao to play with, keeping the astronaut action figure for himself. The shag carpet had turned into the terrain of an alien planet, and they'd been inseparable ever since.

Well, at least until the beginning of sixth grade, when Dante had joined the soccer team and started putting gel in his hair. All this past year he'd felt half-in, half-out to Pao, like he was always thinking about being somewhere else when they were together.

Pao had been grateful for the end of soccer and school and, with the start of summer, the return of the Dante she'd always known. But she couldn't help worrying about what seventh grade would bring for the three of them.

"It's getting late," Pao said, cutting off her own space-out for once and shifting gears, picking up the candy wrappers and chip bags. She was (probably unsurprisingly) a stickler about litter. When you had researched the effect of trash on the world's bodies of water, it felt criminal to leave plastic behind.

Dante grabbed the last empty M&M's bag as the sun began to sink in the sky, signaling the approach of the when-the-streetlights-come-on curfew they'd all been given. "Hand 'em over," he said to Pao. "I'll go to the trash can."

Pao could see it in silhouette, up near the graffitied sign that marked the beginning of the river hiking trail. The city rarely emptied the can, but using

it was better than littering.

“Hurry,” Emma said, and Dante saluted again.

They were always careful to get back home on time. No one wanted their parents to come looking for them because then they’d have to explain where they’d been. They’d all been expressly prohibited from going anywhere near the river after Marisa Martínez had drowned last year, sending all the middle school parents into a panic.

Pao was deeply offended by the restriction. She was a *scientist*. She knew about cold pockets in rivers that could cause hypothermia even when the air temperature was shattering thermometers, and currents that could grab you in water six inches deep, and other invisible traps and hazards beneath the surface that were a one-way ticket to drowning.

Not that she was *afraid* of the water or anything.

Not at all.

And even if she was understandably *wary* of it, there was no way she would admit that to her mom. Because Pao had already heard more than enough lectures in her young life about the dumbest reason ever to be afraid of anything:

A ghost.

That’s right. Pao’s mom had forbidden her from going anywhere near the Gila years ago, well before Marisa’s tragic accident. The reason Pao had missed out on birthday parties, riverside barbecues, and anything else water-related had a different name: La Llorona, or the Weeping Woman—the spirit of a mother who, according to a centuries-old legend, had murdered her own children. And who was also supposedly super active in this region.

And no, her mom’s belief in the story was not a joke, or an exaggeration. Just a complete and total embarrassment.

La Llorona is the most terrifying of all our ghosts, her mom would say. She drowned her children in a fit of rage and was cursed to wander the riverbank forever, calling their names...and looking for her next young victim.

Her mom was a gifted storyteller. Pao didn’t like to admit it, but back when she was eight years old, the stories had given her nightmares. Nightmares she’d erased with good old-fashioned research. The ghosts and wailing and disembodied hands had been replaced with sneaky currents, hypothermia, sunken tree branches that could snag an ankle.... Those things were legitimately scary.

But ghosts? There was no scientific basis for them. No evidence at all that their existence was even possible, let alone likely. An old folktale was definitely not a valid reason to change one's plans.

Especially when the plans happened to be the first boy-girl river-tubing party one had ever been invited to.

Not that Pao was still bitter about that or anything.

Dante took off for the trash can, but not before stuffing the last half of a Snickers in his mouth, his cheeks bulging around it.

"Gross, Dante," Emma said. As he jogged toward the trailhead, she turned to pull one of Pao's shoulder-length braids. They hadn't talked about it, but Pao wondered if Emma was as glad as she was to have the old Dante back.

"Seriously, though," Emma said to Pao, "you're extra out-there today. What are we obsessing about?" Her blue eyes were bright and curious, like she was brainstorming a list of topics for a group project at school. "The potential habitability of Europa?" she guessed first. "Or why they don't make whole sleeves of pink Starbursts? Ooh, is it the dog thing again? What's this week's breed?"

Pao smiled back, grateful that her mom's fixation on all things supernatural hadn't made the list.

Emma Lockwood was more interested in comics than the solar system, and she liked cats more than dogs (the horror!), but she was the kind of person who took the time to learn about what *you* loved. She cared about what you cared about. Pao had moved on from thinking about Europa months ago, but she didn't mind the question—she knew she was lucky to have a friend like Emma.

Plus, seriously, why *didn't* they make whole sleeves of pink Starbursts? They were by far the best flavor.

Even though Emma's family lived on the golf-course side of town, far from the sagging roofs and peeling walls of Dante and Pao's apartment complex, their twosome had effortlessly become a threesome the day Emma had pulled out her America Chavez comic in homeroom.

"I'm not allowed to talk about today's obsession anymore," Pao said under her breath with a resigned look at Dante, who had just reached the can and was tossing their junk-food detritus into it.

"Oh, right," Emma whispered, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Dante doesn't like *algae*."

Pao giggled, but Emma wasn't done. As Dante turned to make his way back, Emma pulled Pao to the river's edge and scooped up a handful of the forbidden green stuff.

That was another thing Pao loved about Emma. Even with her sparkly purple nail polish (she went for manicures with her mom every two weeks), she was still willing to get her hands messy for the sake of a good prank.

Pao scooped a satisfying blob of algae for herself as Emma hid behind the scrub bushes near their blanket. Pao was just about to follow, when a splash at the center of the river drew her eye.

It had been too large to be one of the fish that leaped up for water striders, but strangely, the surface of the river was now still. No ripples. You didn't even have to be a scientist to know that ripples formed in water at any point of disturbance.

Had Pao's ghost ruminations caused her imagination to kick into overdrive?

Goose bumps erupted across her arms.

"Pao! He's coming back!" Emma whisper-shouted from the bushes, and Pao shook her silly fears out of her head. She had imagined it. Or it had just been a trick of the light. There was an explanation for everything, even if it wasn't immediately obvious.

She slid in beside Emma, the scrub hiding them from Dante, who approached looking confused.

"Guys?" he asked, and Pao suppressed a giggle, algae still dripping from her hands.

"Now!" Emma shouted, exploding out of the bush and running toward Dante, Pao right behind her.

For a minute, Pao was worried that too-cool Dante would return. That he'd roll his eyes or do that weird new hair-flip thing and say they were being dumb.

But he screamed, turning on his heel and running like the swamp creature was behind him. "Oh, no you don't!" he shrieked, his recently lower voice jumping three octaves.

They chased him until they were breathless and cracking up, then finally dropped the offensive substance before rinsing their slimy hands in the shallows.

Emma's cell phone rang while she was shaking her hands dry. She always turned away when she answered it, Pao had noticed, covering as much of the