

# PAOLA SANTIAGO AND THE RIVER OF TEARS

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# 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 Wonder Woman case as she could, like it might offend her and Dante by being so shiny and expensive-looking.

Pao didn't have a phone of her own. It was just sort of understood that her mom couldn't afford anything but the army-green landline that hung on the kitchen wall, and Pao didn't dare ask—even though there was a constellation-tracking app she would have *loved* to try. . . .

At least Dante could relate. His abuela probably didn't even know what a smartphone *was*, much less appreciate the benefits of having one. And it wasn't like she was rolling in money either.

"Dinnertime," Emma said with a grimace when she hung up. She swung her leg over her purple mountain bike that, according to Dante, "screamed Colorado."

"See you tomorrow?" Pao asked her. "You're bringing the telescope, right?"

"And you're bringing the snacks," Emma replied. "*Don't* eat all the pink Starbursts this time." She pedaled off, kicking up dust on her way west, away from the swampy smell of the summer-low river.

Pao tried not to envy her too much.

She and Dante walked away from the lingering glow of the sunset that gilded Emma's side of town like a blessing. After a mile or so, their own dilapidated apartment complex loomed ahead in silhouette.

*The sun always bails on us first*, Pao thought. And wasn't that fitting?

The fifteen units of the Riverside Palace apartments (the irony

of the name was not lost on Pao) looked like the kind of motel people drove right by. There were two stories, with one sagging staircase right in the middle.

At one point, there had been sixteen units, but apartment F's roof had caved in three summers ago and no one had bothered to fix it. F was unoccupied now, of course, but sometimes high schoolers smoked cigarettes in it at night. Whenever Dante's abuela caught those kids there, she chased them off with her house slipper, yelling curses in Spanish while they sped away laughing on those low-to-the-ground bikes Pao secretly coveted.

Unit B was empty, too, its dark windows drawing Pao's eye as always. A boy and his parents had lived there until six months ago, when uniformed men had come in a van and arrested them. Pao, Emma, and Dante had witnessed the whole thing while taking turns on Emma's bike in the parking lot.

Pao had tried to ask her mom about it, but she had only hugged her tightly and said something about "privilege" that Pao didn't quite understand.

No one had rented the apartment since, and Pao often wondered what had happened to the people who had been taken from it.

The Palace's stairs, with their peeling sea-green paint and warped railing, were where Pao and Dante always said good night, before he went up and she stayed down. Their apartments, C and K, were stacked on top of each other, separated only by Pao's ceiling and Dante's floor.

Tonight, when they reached the stairs, Pao lifted her hand for their usual high five. Dante slapped it automatically, but he didn't go up right away. Instead he lingered, gazing down at Pao's feet

until she was all too aware of the mud on her Kmart Converse knockoffs and the chocolate smudge on his chin.

*He's taller than me*, Pao realized. When had that happened?

"Hey, so I wanted to say . . ." he began, still looking at her scuffed sneaker toes.

"Yeah?"

"Well, your algae and stuff? I know I give you crap, but I actually think it's pretty cool. I mean, not the algae," he clarified quickly. "But, like, just how much you know about it and stuff. That's cool. So."

"Okay," she said, her cheeks heating up. "Um. Thanks." Dante had never acted this way with her before. She wasn't entirely sure she hated it.

"But seriously, if you ever try to put that gross stuff in my hair again"—he met her eyes, sounding more like his usual self—"I'll think of something way worse than a gummy worm to stick up your nose."

When he smiled, his teeth were bright white against his summer-browened skin. He bumped her shoulder with his as he headed for the stairs, acting all casual and laid-back.

But the tops of his ears were flushed purple—she could see it as the parking-lot lights flared to life.

Pao's curiosity crackled in the wake of Dante's blush. She wished she could stay outside to mull it over while the evening air cooled around her. But her mom was waiting. As always, Pao lifted her chin and steeled herself before she went inside.

Time to face the ghost stories.



## TWO

### Tarot Cards Never Tell You What's for Dinner

**When Pao opened the door to apartment C, the smell of incense was overwhelming. That meant her mom was reading tarot. Pao's steeliness started to buckle. Her mother only consulted the cards when things weren't going well.**

"Mom! I'm home!" Pao called, dropping her backpack on the living room floor. There had to be fifteen candles burning on the shelf above the serape-covered couch. Green candles, Pao noted. She only burned those when they needed money.

Well, more than usual, anyway.

"In here, mijita!" her mom called from the dining room/kitchen, which only took about five steps to reach in their tiny apartment. Pao pasted on a smile as she crossed the threshold, hoping not to notice any other signs of bad news.

Her mom sat cross-legged in the paisley-upholstered dining chair, her dark hair in a messy bun held with a single chopstick. Her eyes were narrowed at a tarot spread on the weathered kitchen table, incense smoke swirling around her.

"You know," Pao said, "if we had a *dog*, he could bark for help when you pass out from all this incense and one of the candles sets the house on fire."

The smoke alarm had stopped working a year ago, but the manager of the Riverside Palace hadn't responded to multiple requests (from Pao, of course) to replace it.

Pao's mom smiled back from the tiny table, but her eyes were tired. "My old-souled baby," she said, reaching out to squeeze Pao's hand. "You've always been the adult around here."

A sadness settled in Pao's chest. Mom had said it lightly, like a joke, but Pao didn't think it was funny. They were always speaking to each other in a kind of code, disguising important facts. Pao wished that, for once, they could just *talk*. That not everything had to be signs and candles and old souls and too-real jokes.

"Do those cards say anything about what's for dinner?" Pao asked, trying to hold on to her smile even though the incense smoke was giving her a headache.

"Oh no," her mom said. "Is it that time already?" She pushed aside her too-long bangs and looked in disbelief out the glass door to the patio. Twilight was settling over the crowded terracotta pots where Pao's mom grew herbs and flowers.

Pao tried to quash a feeling of irritation. Had her mom really been so wrapped up in the cards that she didn't notice the time? It wasn't like the whole sky-changing-colors thing was easy to miss.

But of course, her mom didn't allow clocks anywhere she did divination work. She always said, along with cell phones and microwaves, clocks "messed with the vibe." Apparently, the ancestors couldn't get to her through all that "noise."

And the ancestors, among other things, protected them from the ghosts.

*Too bad they can't also protect us from the rent going up,* Pao thought. Her mom tried to hide that kind of stuff from her, but

Pao trained her observational powers constantly. She didn't miss the notices with red rectangles around the past-due amounts.

Pao never would have admitted it out loud, but her mind went immediately to Emma, who was probably sitting down to a meal consisting of multiple food groups right now. Meat and potatoes and something green that her parents would bribe her with ice cream to finish. At Emma's house, they didn't have to joke about fire hazards, or who the real adult was.

As quickly as the thought landed, Pao swatted it away. It wasn't fair. *Mom's doing the best she can.* Plus, they were a team, and Pao didn't want to know what would happen if either of them believed otherwise. Even for a minute.

Pao's mom got up and rummaged in the freezer until she found a Ziploc bag full of Señora Mata's cheese-and-jalapeño tamales. "I forgot we had these!" she said, turning around and preheating the oven before Pao could check the leftovers closely for freezer burn. "It'll only be forty-five minutes, okay? Some brain food for your experiments!"

On her way back to her seat in front of the tarot cards, her mom kissed her on the forehead, which only made Pao feel worse.

"You know, I'm actually not that hungry anymore," Pao said, even though she was. Right then, the urge to get out of the incense-filled kitchen and be alone with her guilty thoughts was stronger than the urge to eat.

Plus, leftover tamales always got all dry and rubbery when they were reheated in the oven, and the cheese ones were her least favorite kind.

"We ate a lot of junk food this afternoon—I think I feel a stomachache coming on."

"Let me get you some peppermint tincture!" her mom offered, turning too fast. Two tarot cards fluttered down like dry leaves in a wind gust.

"It's okay, really," Pao said quickly. "I'm just gonna go lie down."

"You sure?" her mom asked. "You know, El Cuco can hear a growling stomach from miles away. . . . And I'm working late at the bar—I won't be here to chase him out of your room tonight."

Her mom's face was somber, but the bogeyman story was so juvenile it only made Pao more eager to escape. She hated pitying her own mother—it felt like wearing a shirt that didn't fit right.

"That doesn't even make sense," Pao said. "What kind of monster would want to eat a skinny kid?"

Pao didn't know why she had posed that question. It wasn't like she wanted to hear her mom's rebuttal. . . .

But none came. Her mom's eyes were glued to the floor, probably already drawing some significance from the way the cards had landed under the table.

On another day, Pao might have jokingly asked if the Tower and the Fool cards meant they could get a dog. But today, for a reason she didn't fully understand, she just left the room without saying good night.

*Emma's mom would follow her daughter into the hallway at a time like this.* Pao would've bet her Celestron beginner's microscope kit on it. And not just because the microscope was totally inadequate for someone at her skill level.

But Pao sat on her bed alone, surrounded by the pictures of the SpaceX and Blue Origin launches she'd printed out at the library, the colored ink streaky and dull. Taped to the wall above her desk (which was her grandma's old sewing table, so it didn't



have any drawers) was last year's science project on algae farming. She'd won first place without even mentioning the organism's potential to power rockets.

Meanwhile, her mom burned candles in search of money to pay bills and thought the right card layout could keep ghosts and monsters away.

Maybe, Pao thought sleepily, if she had enough algae, she could blast herself right out of this place. . . .

In her dream that night, Pao walked along the river, and above her was a darkness so absolute it made her shudder.

A green glow emanated from the water, and as she made her way toward it, she saw silhouetted shapes beneath, passing back and forth in a haunting kind of dance.

She knelt on the bank, sensing the fabric of the dream bending and shimmering around her. But even as she recognized the surreality, she was excited about finding bioluminescent creatures this close to home. Would they stay still long enough to let her get a good look?

One of the creatures broke the surface, and Pao leaned closer, mesmerized by the pale grace of it, the long, fingerlike tentacles reaching for the sky.

But was one of those tentacles wearing Emma's ring? Heart-shaped and set with a real ruby, it was kind of hard to mistake, even from a distance. . . .

That's when Pao realized they weren't tentacles. It was a hand. A human hand. With fingernails painted a sparkly purple.

She tried to scramble back from the river's edge, but the hand grabbed her by the wrist, the ruby ring glinting in the green glow

from the water. Pao screamed, a high, hollow sound drowned out almost instantly by an unearthly wailing that kicked up all around her like a gust of wind.

Pao was pulled farther toward the water's terrifying depths, her shoes and socks getting soaked as she fought futilely against the hand's inexorable grip. The crying grew louder.

It grew louder still as she stumbled and fell to her knees.

But somehow it was loudest of all when the hand pulled her under the water's surface.

Pao woke in a panic, half off her mattress, a scream lodged in her throat.

*It was a dream, she told herself. Just a dream.*

The weird splash she'd seen yesterday—and its weirder lack of ripples—came to mind. It must have seeped into her subconscious.

Pao pulled out the clandestine, taped-together alarm clock that she kept under her bed. It read 1:15 a.m. A grumble erupted from her stomach, making her think of El Cuco and her mother's warning. She'd fallen asleep in her clothes—even her shoes.

Pao breathed deeply, trying to calm her racing heart, focusing on the glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling as the dream's images slowly faded.

It had been a long time since she'd dreamed of drowning.

She'd had her first riverbank dream when she was nine. Nothing much had happened in it. But for third-grade Pao, that terrible, utterly dark sky had been enough to make her wake up screaming, drenched in sweat, and send her running to her mother's room for comfort.

Throughout the rest of elementary school, she'd had the

dreams at least once a week. Her mom had been at a loss. She'd invited curandera friends and other healers to try to purge whatever was haunting Pao, but nothing worked.

After that, they'd gone to a real doctor's office, where nurses attached things to Pao's head and screened her for all kinds of conditions she didn't have.

Eventually, Pao was referred to a child psychiatrist—one her mom would never have been able to afford. Pao was midway through fourth grade by then, and even at that age, she noticed the dark circles under her mom's eyes from being awakened so often, the wrinkles that appeared on her forehead every time the doctor suggested a new treatment or a test their insurance didn't cover.

So Pao had stopped running to her mom. She pretended that the dreams had gone away on their own. Over time, they became just another strange part of her life, one she hardly thought about beyond the first few terrifying minutes after she woke up.

But she'd never dreamed of a disembodied hand before. And definitely not one wearing Emma's ring . . .

When her pulse had returned to its normal resting rate (more or less), Pao shook herself mentally, cursing her mom for telling her scary stories at such a young age.

*There's no such thing as ghosts*, she told her reflection in the window as she kicked off her shoes, even though she looked a little like a spirit herself, pale in the warped glass.

*Hypothermia, cold pockets, submerged branches, invisible currents*. Pao recited the true dangers of the river like a mantra. They were a mile away, no threat to her in this quiet apartment. *Hypothermia, cold pockets* . . .

The hallway was empty, the apartment quiet as Pao headed for the kitchen. Her mom always left for her waitressing job at eight thirty, and she didn't come home until closing time, around two a.m. If anyone asked, Pao was supposed to say that Dante's abuela watched her at night, and she had for a while. But when she turned ten, Pao petitioned to be allowed to sleep in her own bed, tired of the stiff, uncomfortable sofa at Dante's.

Her mom, so concerned with supernatural threats, had been less concerned with real-world things like home invasions and electrical fires and Child Protective Services, and Pao had gotten her wish.

Strange as her mom's priorities were, Pao knew she was grown-up enough to keep herself safe. As if to prove the point, she walked through the living room, checking all the incense burners and candle glasses to make sure everything had been extinguished. Tonight, she noted gratefully, they had. Her mom had even remembered to lock the door behind her, though Pao wasn't sure why. She was pretty sure La Llorona wouldn't be deterred by anything as pedestrian as a dead bolt.

Pao didn't let herself think of the ghostly hand from her dream. Or the wailing. The memories were already starting to fade.

"If we had a dog, we wouldn't need to worry about monsters and ghosts," Pao grumbled, even though there was no one around to hear her perfectly sound argument.

The Moscow watchdog was widely considered the best breed for home protection, but their large size made them impractical for apartments. Staffordshire terriers were more sensible size-wise, but apartment managers didn't love their resemblance to

the pit bull. There was a perfect breed out there somewhere, Pao knew. She just had to keep looking.

In the kitchen, she planned to eat cereal from the box until her stomach quieted down, but she found a plate covered by a pot lid. It held two of the three cheese tamales and a note:

*In case you get worried about El Cuco. I love you.*

This time Pao made a conscious decision not to compare the note, or the cold chewy tamales, to what was probably happening at Emma's house. But even so, disappointment in her own life took up more space in her stomach than the food.