Dear Reader,

River Woman, River Demon is a psychological thriller that weaves together the threads of folk magick with personal and cultural empowerment on the Río Grande. At its haunted heart lies a mystery and a ghost story, with dark magical realism woven throughout. I'm excited to share this book with you because I believe that for readers unfamiliar with folk magick, it deepens understanding of cultural practices. And for readers like me and my family, it offers necessary representation. We can see ourselves depicted in the story. Something we've sorely needed.

The magical realism of this book is an alchemical and cultural extension of my childhood and motherhood experiences—I grew up in the desert on the Mexicali border of Southern California, then moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I raised my children and did most of my mothering work, so it's a natural extension of the themes and characterization of my novels that they take place in the places that raised me. The desert communities I write about remain a magical and potent place of inspiration for my stories. As Eva notes in the story, "The desert is strange. We all know how strange this place can be."

During early motherhood, I suffered severe postpartum depression that bordered on postpartum psychosis at times, but there is such a stigma against mental illness and such a paucity of awareness and resources for mothers struggling through these issues that I was terrified to talk about my experiences for fear of repercussions or outside intervention. This filled me with shame and dread; I felt isolated and alone, disenfranchised and disempowered, much like Eva at the onset of *River Woman, River Demon*. Now, I am an advocate for and write with vulnerability about protagonists with mental illnesses because it's vital to break the stigma, especially for folks of color.

Magical realism and blurring spirituality with magick and science helped me immensely, and all my poetry collections and novels have grown from my fascination with all of these pursuits. And, like magick, researching and writing on these topics became a balm that helped heal me. Another surprising thing that helped was reading dark psychological thrillers because I saw women going through painful, difficult situations and sometimes making terrible decisions, yet speaking with such candor. So-called unlikeable women. Bad mothers. I soaked them in; dozens of psychological thrillers as, somehow, I knew I wasn't alone and that having dark thoughts and demons doesn't make us dark or terrible. It just makes us human. It just makes us alive.

But I kept noticing that the protagonists were white women, often affluent, often in a major city, often on the east coast. I didn't see myself, my mom, or comadres and women who looked, talked, acted, or felt like we did about family or culture, for instance, who didn't necessarily grow

up negotiating the tensions between culture and mainstream. So even though I saw something integral to destigmatizing mental illness in women and mothers in particular, even though I was excited by the possibility of women getting to act irreverent and bitchy and sometimes even full-on antisocial in every capacity, I didn't see this same permission given to women of color and Latina/Indigenous women in particular.

So I wrote us into the genre.

This is my version of a Chicana *Girl on the Train*. It's also my love song to the folk magick and spirituality of the desert—all wrapped up in a haunting, and haunted, page-turning thriller that, I hope, keeps you guessing until the end.

All light in the darkness,

Jenn