

CHAPTER
FOUR



The Shooting

By virtue of their ages, Bernie and Fred sat in the front seat. Ricardo and his three friends were all sardined into the back seat. Fred's driving kept the four backseat boys constantly jostling and working to stay in their allotted spaces. At any moment a bump or swerve could squirt one of the boys off the bench seat and onto the floorboard. Fred was always successful at driving through the exact center of a pothole. The mariachi music was so loud everyone had to shout to be heard. While the boys in the front were having a conversation, the boys in the back were badgering Ricardo about playing the accordion.

"Do you sleep with that thing at night, dreaming of being the first Mexican Lawrence Welk?" Even though the boys' mouths were open, postured for loud belly laughs, not much could be heard above the music and the wind whipping through the car. One boy reached across and grabbed Ricardo's right arm while another grabbed his left, and they began working the limbs to mimic Ricardo playing his beloved instrument. Ricardo struggled for a few seconds before he was able to twist free of the boys' grips. He then looked to his brother in the front seat just in time to see a similar fracas erupt.

While continuing to drive erratically, Fred suddenly reached across and pounded Bernie in the middle of the chest. Bernie cried out in pain, and Ricardo then realized that the shouting in the front seat had not been solely to be heard

above the music. Bernie angrily grabbed Fred's hand and twisted it backward, causing Fred to scream out in pain. Fred almost swerved into the ditch as he tried to pull his arm away from Bernie.

"Take that back!" Bernie yelled.

"No way! Let go! You're going to kill us all! Let me repeat it just in case you missed it the first time! Your band stinks! Your little accordion-playing brother stinks! And YOU stink! I'm starting my own band, and there's nothing you can do about it, moron. I won't play in your sorry excuse of a band ever again!"

Fred finally freed his arm and slammed on the brakes. Ricardo flew forward and hit his face on the seat in front of him; his body helplessly slid down to the floorboard. Scrambling to get to his feet before Bernie made a fuss over him, he twisted until he could grab the top of the seat and pull himself up. As his vision cleared the top of the seat, he looked at his brother and quickly realized that Bernie didn't even know he might be hurt. The two front car doors opened, and Bernie and Fred stomped to the front of the car, their silhouettes manifested by the headlights. They were yelling and waving their arms when Bernie reached inside his jacket and pulled out a gun! *A gun!?!? Where did Bernie get a gun? Mom would never let Bernie have a gun!*

Then, in what seemed like slow motion, Ricardo looked over at Fred, hoping that the teen was scrambling to avoid the trajectory of a bullet in case Bernie's finger slipped, and he shot the gun. Surely Bernie didn't have a *loaded* gun. Ricardo's gaze finally landed on Fred, and the suspense became palpable as Fred stood tall, almost pushing his chest out, daring Bernie to shoot. Suddenly, in one smooth motion, Fred's hand darted into his jacket, and then his arm extended toward Bernie. Loud pops and sparks appeared simultaneously at the end of Fred's hand. He had a gun too! Ricardo's mouth opened to scream, but nothing came out. He watched in horror as his brother crumpled to the ground. As if he did this every day of his life, Fred turned and ran back to the car, climbed into the driver's seat, positioned the marker on D, and sped away as he pulled his door shut. Ricardo began screaming and clawing at Fred.

"That's my brother! You shot my brother! You can't just leave him there! We have to go back for him! Please!!" The hot tears were streaming down his face, and he could barely find enough oxygen to breathe, let alone plead for his brother's life. What a nightmare! One minute he was cruising around with the cool kids, and the next, his brother was lying wounded or dead on the street. How could this be?

Ricardo began pounding on Fred again and demanding that they go back for his brother. His pleas became louder and more intense as he thought about his mother's face when the police would tell her that her son had been shot. Not for some heroic act, but in some nondescript shootout over . . . what were they fighting about.

Finally, Fred hit the brakes, and the car careened into an awkward U-turn. Without saying a word or acknowledging Ricardo's begging, Fred was headed back toward that harrowing scene. Ricardo kept blinking away the tears to clear his vision. He stopped his wailing and prepared his mind for what he was about to see. Would he hear his brother moaning in agony, or would Bernie's body be in a lifeless heap on the pavement? Without taking his eyes off the road, Ricardo wiped his nose on his arm and clenched the seat. The other boys sat perfectly still, waiting in fear, watching their friend's face to tell them if Bernie were dead or alive.

As Fred slowed to turn the corner onto the street where the shooting had taken place, Ricardo saw his brother staggering around in the street. Thank God! He's not dead! Bernie spotted the car, driving toward him and began walking straight into the headlights.

Before Ricardo could process the fact that his brother seemed to be okay, Bernie raised his gun and pointed it directly at the windshield. The boys in the back seat hit the floor, heads, and noses cracking together. The screams coming from the back seat were screams of real terror. Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! The bullets were coming fast! Bernie was going to kill them all!

Instead of racing out of harm's way, Fred stopped right there in the road. They were sitting ducks! Incredulously, the passenger door opened, and Bernie reclaimed his passenger seat. The screams intensified as the boys awaited more gunfire. The mad shooter was now in the car with his victims. Not one of the backseat boys thought to open the door and escape the trap. There was no escape. All four boys began crossing themselves and saying their last prayers.

So, this is how my twelve years of life will end, thought Ricardo. At the hand of my brother, who has obviously become a deranged killer. How could this happen?

After a few moments, the realization set in that the shooting had stopped, and no one was wounded or dead. The screaming slowly died down. In place of the sounds of terror was the growing sound of laughter. Not polite laughter that one hears after a humorous joke, but belly laughter, loud guffawing, the type of laughter that makes breathing simultaneously impossible.

The four boys slowly raised themselves above the seat and looked first at Bernie, whose head was leaning back, eyes squeezed shut. Howls of cachinnation were pouring from his mouth. The boys then turned their heads to look at Fred, whose hands were pounding the top of the steering wheel as he doubled over in laughter.

"They. . . thought . . . it . . . was real!" Bernie yelled between audible gasps for air. He held up his gun and tapped it. "It's plastic! It shoots blanks!"

Fred finally wiped his face, and his laughter waned to a few intermittent rumbles as he put the car into gear and began weaving through the streets of Argentine. It was late, and everyone would be attending early mass tomorrow,

everyone except Bernie, who might not live to see tomorrow if mom found out about this. All the way home, Ricardo wavered between being embarrassed about how he carried on – crying like a little girl and being angry about his brother playing such a cruel joke on him. *Just wait until mom finds out about this! But wait! If she finds out, she just might put a stop to the boys going out and having fun. Better keep this a secret and hope Bernie goes to confession before he really dies.*