

# desert passage

a novel  
by  
P.S. Carrillo

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Summary: Two cousins go on an impromptu journey from northern Arizona to Santa Fe, New Mexico when their grandmother gets sick, and their experiences along the way give them invaluable insights about life, family, and themselves.

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**For every young man  
who has dared to dream  
of a road leading to somewhere.**

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## chapter 1

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**M**iguel and Ramón stood staring at the stacks of boxes and luggage that covered the concrete driveway.

“Dad said to load the boxes first, then the luggage,” reminded Miguel, picking up one of the lighter boxes.

“Yeah, but do the boxes all go to one side, then the luggage?” asked Ramón.

“How am I supposed to know?” Miguel answered his cousin. “Let’s just put the stuff in, it’s getting hot out here, man.”

One by one they lifted the heavy boxes and loaded the over-packed luggage into the back of the truck. The garage door was open and they could see Rodrigo going in and out of the house bringing out more boxes to pack.

“How much more is there?” Miguel complained.

“I’ll go get it,” sighed Ramón. He walked slowly over to the newly stacked boxes and picked one up. In the corner of the garage a pile of stuff caught his eye. A large assortment of camping and fishing equipment was gathering spiderwebs and dust.

“Hey, remember when we used to go on trips with Grandpa?” Ramón said, walking back to the truck.

“Yeah,” Miguel replied mournfully, “I wish we were going on a trip now.”

After the back of the SUV was packed, Rodrigo came out with two more boxes. He walked over to the truck and opened the back door to inspect the loaded cargo with a critical eye.

“This truck wasn’t packed right! Boys, get over here and unload this thing right now!” he ordered.

"See? I told you the luggage was supposed to go in first," Ramón reprimanded his cousin.

"We are leaving in fifteen minutes, and I want this truck loaded correctly!" Rodrigo said sternly.

"I don't think all this stuff is going to fit," said Miguel.

"Make it work!" snapped his father and walked back into the house.

The two boys clumsily unloaded the truck and stood staring at the boxes and luggage piled on the concrete. It didn't seem fair to either of them that they had to do the hard work of loading the truck. They weren't included in the family's vacation plans. Once they arrived at their grandmother's house, they would be left behind while Miguel's parents and little sister drove to Santa Fe for a big family reunion. It was their punishment.

"How long did Dad say we were going to stay at Grandma's?" Miguel asked picking up a heavy piece of luggage.

"One whole month, remember?" Ramón answered.

The boys both shook their heads in disbelief that they had to spend half of their summer vacation in a remote town in northern Arizona. Neither one could imagine what they had done to deserve such a terrible fate. Miguel had to cancel a two-week soccer camp for advanced players and Ramón had to cancel his plans to spend the first part of his summer vacation with a favorite cousin in Los Angeles. When they got back home, they were not going to be allowed time with friends. Their summer was ruined.

"Let's get going!" Rodrigo yelled, closing the garage door.

Miguel's mother and little sister climbed into the SUV. The two boys followed.

"I want to sit up front!" insisted Marisol. "Miguel always pulls my braids!"

"Now, Marisol, you have to sit in a seat with a seatbelt. Get into the second seat behind me. Miguel, sit on the opposite end," ordered his mother.

"I don't want any funny business back there. We have a four-hour trip, and I have no intention of stopping for anything, but I will if I have to straighten either one of you out!" shouted Rodrigo to the boys.

Miguel and Ramón remained silent and adjusted their iPod earbuds in their ears. Four hours was a long time in the family car with nothing to do.

Marisol climbed into the back and organized her dolls and pink backpack on the spacious bench seat. As soon as she was situated she felt a tug on her braids.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Mom, he's pulling on my hair!"

"Miguel, please don't start that now, your father needs to concentrate on his driving!" reacted the mother.

"Keep it up, boys, and you'll be walking to your grandmother's house!" yelled the father.

"Rodrigo, please," said the mother.

"Connie, let me handle this," Rodrigo replied. After thinking to himself for a moment he added, "You know, that's not a bad idea."

"What do you mean?" Connie asked, adjusting her handbag on the floorboard of the truck.

"I should have thought of it before. I should have had both boys walk to my mother's house. They could have made it in a few days," he said, half joking.

"He's just kidding, just leave your sister alone," said Connie to the boys.

"They would never make it anyway, only real men take on the impossible," Rodrigo chided.

Miguel and Ramón turned up the volume on their iPods. The thought of being abandoned in Arizona was bad enough but to have to listen to their father's belittling remarks on the way to their desert internment was excruciating.



## chapter 2

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“**T**he boys will be just fine, don’t you worry. I’ll take good care of them,” reassured Abuelita Rosa.

“Mamá, I know you will, but I want them to do all the work on this list,” insisted Rodrigo, handing a piece of paper to his mother. “Everything on this list must be completed by the time we get back.”

“*Ay, mijo*, there’s so much to do,” Abuelita Rosa said, reading the list with her tired eyes. “Maybe if they did half . . . .”

“No, Mamá. I want all of it done, no excuses!”

Abuelita Rosa didn’t argue with her headstrong son. She went back to the kitchen and checked on the food cooking on the stove. When her family had arrived, they had been greeted by the warm, familiar scents of her house. A fresh pot of rice and spicy tamales were warming in the oven and the *mole* sauce needed just one more stir. She picked up the large spoon from the tiled countertop and asked her family to sit at her table.

“Boys, come and eat,” said Connie.

The television was blaring in the small living room. Sounds of gunfire and explosions vibrated through the house.

“Turn that thing off and get over here!” yelled Rodrigo. “I should have never allowed you to bring a video game system. What was I thinking?”

“But it gives the boys something to do when they visit. I don’t want them to be bored,” Abuelita Rosa answered.

Rodrigo glared at the expensive video equipment and the stack of games lying scattered on the floor. The intrusive

noise of the television had been turned off but the irritating sounds still echoed in his head.

"I don't want you two just playing video games while we're gone. You have a lot of work to do," Rodrigo warned, sitting down at the head of the kitchen table.

"They should have some fun, too. It's their summer vacation," suggested Abuelita Rosa.

"Why do they give kids vacations in the summer?" Rodrigo replied. "No one gives *me* a vacation and I work hard to support my family. I have to make my own vacations!"

"Let's have a nice dinner. Tomorrow we'll be leaving and the boys will have plenty of time to think about why they are here," said Connie.

"You're too hard on them, *mijo*. They're just boys," added Abuelita Rosa.

"Things are different now, Mamá. It's not like when Enrique and I were growing up."

Rodrigo looked at his brother's picture placed on the wood sideboard next to the kitchen table. The youthful face of his brother stood staring out at the family from the gold metal frame. Rodrigo's chest tightened with the sudden remembrance of grief, and he paused before continuing his thoughts aloud.

"These kids nowadays don't respect authority. They don't know what it takes to be real men in today's world," he lectured. "We didn't grow up with all the advantages that kids have today. I remember working every summer. We had to work for what we had."

"*Mijo*, don't you remember the special trips you made with your father and Enrique?" Abuelita Rosa asked patiently.

"If we did go on trips it's because we earned it!" Rodrigo replied without thinking.

Abuelita Rosa listened to her son with love. When the last plate of food was served on the table she said softly to Rodrigo, “Things are not so different, *mijo*. Boys still need guidance and love to grow up strong.”

Rodrigo heard his mother’s words and didn’t contradict her, out of respect. He quietly sopped up the *mole* sauce with a warm tortilla and whispered to himself, “I know what’s best for my sons.”