







C. A. PRESS

## JENNI RIVERA

THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF A WARRIOR BUTTERFLY

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JENNI  
RIVERA

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THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF  
A WARRIOR BUTTERFLY

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Leila Cobo



**PRESS**

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*To the memory of Jenni Rivera and all the  
“Warrior Butterflies” who persevere  
no matter what the odds.*





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INTRODUCTION

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# Bury Me with the Band

*El día en que yo me muera  
que me entierren con la banda*

— From the song  
“Que me entierren con la banda”  
(Bury Me with the Band)  
by Antonio Aguilar,  
performed by Jenni Rivera and Lupillo Rivera



On the morning of her death, Dolores Janney Rivera Saavedra woke up feeling great. The night before, she had performed to a sellout crowd in Colima, Mexico, and she would be at the Monterrey Arena that night.

For Rivera, this was a very important show. With 16,000 seats, the Monterrey Arena is one of the biggest, most prestigious venues in Mexico. Jenni had done a concert there once before, and it had sold out. For this one, she had decided to place the stage in the very center of the arena floor—creating a 360-degree stage, like a bullfight ring—to fit more seats, and to have a more intimate atmosphere. Tickets had sold out in less than fifteen days, quite an accomplishment, and Jenni felt that she had a tremendous responsibility to the audience in Monterrey, especially now that she was a judge on *La Voz . . . Mexico*, and was seen on television by millions of viewers every week.

She had enthusiastically, painstakingly planned the concerts down to the last detail. Her band and the mariachi group that accompanied her on her *ranchero* songs would also travel from



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Colima. She had her carefully chosen wardrobe with her, ranging from a sumptuous pink gown with a diagonal floral pattern, to a super-tight pair of jeans and jacket that hugged every inch of her generous curves. Each wardrobe change corresponded perfectly to the music, which also reflected the many facets of Rivera: party girl, classy lady, grand diva, best friend.

That Saturday afternoon, as she arrived in Monterrey, Rivera was all of those things. Her trusted inner circle was with her, including Arturo Rivera, her long-time publicist and one of the most popular public relations agents in Mexico. Jenni trusted his judgment implicitly, and considered him her right-hand man who helped her go to battle with the media when necessary. And there was her makeup artist, Jacob Yenale, a Mexican living in Los Angeles who worked with all of the “greats,” from Christina Aguilera to Rihanna, but he was such close pals with Rivera he cleared his whole calendar just so he could travel all over Mexico at her side. Jorge Gonzalez was her stylist, in charge of maintaining the very long, exquisite extensions that had become Jenni’s trademark. From her management team, on this trip Rivera traveled with her lawyer, Mario Macias.

The mood was festive when they landed. Things could not have been going any better for Rivera. Colima had been a smashing success, and Monterrey should be even bigger. And the next day, on Sunday, they would be on the set of *La Voz*, for the semifinals of the talent show in search of Mexico’s next great voice. Rivera was feeling so good, she had even made plans to go out after her concert. The band M-40 also had a show in Monterrey that night, and she had asked their promoter to reserve a VIP table for her at the club where they were performing. Jenni



liked to support up-and-coming acts—over the years she had strongly supported artists like Akwid, Larry Hernandez, Espinoza Paz, 3BallMTY—and M-40 was starting to make a name for themselves.

The promoter set aside not just one but four tables for Jenni and her entourage, and he even had a disguise waiting for her, so that no one would recognize her. He had also reserved four hotel rooms for her, which as things turned out would go unused. After they landed in Monterrey, Jenni and her group headed straight to the arena for a sound check, which got delayed because the band and the mariachis hadn't arrived from Colima yet. Jenni always traveled with her own band: La Banda Divina de Jenni Rivera. The group lived in Mazatlan, and they toured with her throughout Mexico and the United States, along with sound, lighting, video, and pyrotechnics technicians, and her production director, Rudy Echaury. Although when she was just getting her start, Jenni had hired local mariachi musicians to keep costs down, over the last year her star had risen so high that she could afford to bring the same mariachi group along on tour to perform on most of the major concert stages in Mexico.

The sound check wouldn't be finished until almost eight o'clock that evening. Jenni was so happy with the sound quality and the venue that she told her promoter she wanted to come back and do another show in February. They even picked out a tentative date: February 16th.

That night, Rivera arrived at the arena ready to give the show of her life. It was always like that, but on that particular night you could really feel the electricity in the air.

She stepped out onto the stage dressed all in black, wearing a



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formfitting dress and a short leather jacket. She wore high heels and a long necklace. Her hair, styled by Gonzalez, fell in a golden, cascading mane down her back, almost reaching her waist.

“Ladies, when we drink tequila we get loose!” she exclaimed, raising a glass to the crowd. “Here’s to getting loose!” she yelled to the sellout throng.

At the end of the night, after she had worn her stunning gowns, after the tears had streamed down her cheeks as she sang her most sentimental *rancheras*, she got a big surprise: executives from her record label, Fonovisa, took the stage to present her with Gold and Platinum records, commemorating the stellar sales of her two latest albums. It was the icing on the cake for a special night, which could not have gone any better.

“Ay, *m’ija*, I’m happy, so happy,” she said at the press conference after the show. “I’m so happy . . . all the times I’ve been knocked down, I’ve gotten back up. God is good and He never lets go of my hand. And I have my fans, who support me, and live with me, and want to see me do well.”

Once the press conference was over, Jenni and her team were supposed to go to the hotel or to the M-40 show. But at some point there was a change of plans. Now they wouldn’t spend the night at the hotel or partying at the club. Jenni would go back to Mexico City that very night; she had to be at the Televisa studios at eleven o’clock sharp the next morning to start taping *La Voz*, and she must not have wanted to run the risk of arriving late. So she decided to make the trip right after her show, so she would be in Mexico City bright and early the next morning and keep right on working. The travel arrangements were made so last-





minute that when her lawyer Macias called her production director Rudy Echaury to let him know he could go along with them in a private jet, Echaury didn't get the message in time. He was at his hotel, taking a shower. By the time he checked his messages it was too late, the group had already left. He stuck to his original plan, returning to Mexico City on a commercial Volaris airlines flight.

Once the show and the press conference were over, Rivera and the group traveling with her got in the car that would take them to the airport, without Echaury, and without Alejandra Guzman, who Jenni had also invited to fly with them on the private jet. But Alejandra decided to take a commercial flight as she had originally planned, because she was traveling with her boyfriend.

From the backseat of the car driving to the airport, Yenale, the makeup artist, took a picture of the group on his cell phone and posted it on the Internet. Everyone smiled brightly, the joy on their faces shining through.

"On our way back to Mexico City . . . Jenni Rivera, Arturo, Gigi and me. I love youuu!!" he posted along with the photo.

On the drive to the airport, Jenni used the time to answer messages and tweets. One was from Javier Estrella, a friend and Televisa reporter who had gotten concerned after seeing her cry during the concert.

"Jenni, please tell me you're okay?" he wrote at 12:27.

"Really I'm at peace!" she answered him at 3:09 in the morning. "I'm so happy . . . I'm fine . . . I promise. Some songs just make me cry. That's all."

"God is with me. I trust in Him," she added a minute later.



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“My respect and admiration for you,” Estrella replied at 3:11. “Have a good night a great trip to Mexico City!”

Exactly four minutes later, the Learjet numbered N3445MC set off for Mexico City, and Rivera had to turn off her cell phone. The jet had been made in 1969—it was forty-three years old—but Jenni would not have known that. And she would not have known that her pilot, Manuel Perez Soto, was seventy-eight years old, or that his copilot, Alejandro Torres, was only twenty.

The jet took off into the dark sky over Monterrey, now gone quiet after Jenni’s show. It was a clear night, with no rain, and five minutes into the flight, at 28,000 feet, the city lights began to fade into the distance.

Maybe Rivera had closed her eyes, tired after such a long day. Maybe she stayed up to talk with her friends, since it was a short flight; they would be in Toluca, just outside of Mexico City, in only an hour. In any case, at around 3:19 in the morning something went wrong, and the Learjet, which had so gracefully taken to the air, suddenly stalled. Its flight was abruptly interrupted, like a bird colliding with a glass door. The jet shuddered, indecisive, and without warning went down, reaching a speed of 1,000 kilometers an hour.

It happened so fast, Jenni and the others probably did not even have time to notice that anything was terribly wrong. The Learjet mercilessly crashed to the Mexican ground, and at 3:20 AM, the air traffic control tower reported that they had lost contact with the aircraft.

Jenni Rivera, forty-three years old, lay dead in a remote ranch on the outskirts of Monterrey, far from the arena that had wrapped her in thunderous applause just hours before.



JENNI  
RIVERA



CHAPTER

1

# The Rivera Dynasty



The Rivera Dynasty. The Riveras. La Familia Rivera. That's what people called them. "La Familia," "The Clan," in capital letters, as if they were a sacred tribe, or royalty, or nobility. When they were seen together, the myth only grew: Don Pedro Rivera, the patriarch who's hand and vision had molded his children's destinies; Lupillo, in his expensive suits, instantly recognizable with his shaved head and mustache; Pedro Jr., the charismatic preacher; Rosie, the little sister, a beauty, with a face like a lovely, fair, blonde Madonna; Juan and Gustavo, also singers; and Jenni, curvaceous and exuberant, with full lips and a big smile. They talked about the mother—Doña Rosa—who was rarely seen, like in traditional Italian families where the mothers were powerful, but silent figures. It was assumed she must have been a woman of steel to have raised a brood of children with such strong personalities, although she rarely made any public statements.

Each one led their own lives independently, but once in a while "The Riveras" would appear together, and they were

JENNI RIVERA

something to behold. The men in their Mexican sombreros, boots and macho attitude; and her, Jenni, a dose of pure femininity: a curvy figure, with flawless makeup, long, always carefully styled hair, tight, but tasteful dresses, bright-colored outfits—purples, reds and blues—or dressed all in black, a color she wore so well. It was impressive just to watch them interact, since each one had their own distinct personality and their own space, and they were mutually respectful of one another. When The Riveras were together, no one dominated the conversation, no one interrupted the others, or openly disagreed. One seamlessly picked up where the other left off, like runners in a relay race. If one stood out from the rest, it was Don Pedro, for his sentimentality. It was not unusual to see him shed a few heartfelt tears during interviews.

The Rivera Family was unified, and loyal. They must have had their disagreements in private, misunderstandings must have flared up when so many strong personalities were together in one room. But seen from the outside, they were an unbreakable chain, with every link supporting the next. If the press criticized one—and that happened very often—the others pounced like a pack of wolves to defend their own. Each could retreat to their own corner, and take care of their own business, but woe be it to anyone who messed with their brother, their sister, their father, their blood.

Jenni said it herself in the press conference the night of her death, when she was asked if she ever fought with Lupillo, her most famous brother.

“As siblings we don’t always agree on everything, and we both have our tempers, more than any of the others,” she answered



with her characteristic candor. “But whenever I’ve had a really big problem in my life my brother forgets everything, whatever disagreement or hurt feeling and he talks to me and says, ‘sister, I’m with you.’”

The Riveras. On the day of Jenni’s funeral, at the Gibson Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, the family dressed all in red and white, they looked like kings, princes and princesses, so dignified, so tasteful and, above all, so eloquent. From the eldest, Don Pedro, right down to the youngest, Jenni’s son Johnny, they spoke with the natural ease and the expressive vocabulary of those who are either highly educated, or have grown up in an environment surrounded by excellent orators. But the Riveras weren’t royalty or nobility. Unlike other musical families, like the Aguilars or the Fernandez family—their artistic story had barely begun, since the biggest stars weren’t the father, but the children—Lupillo and Jenni. As far as money, education or any kind of aristocratic lineage went, the family had started out with absolutely none of those things.

As Jenni said herself over and over again over the years, “No one opened any doors for me. I pushed them all open for myself.”

And what doors she had opened. On the day she died, Jenni Rivera was the highest-selling artist at her record label, the multinational Fonovisa, and she was the highest selling female artist in regional Mexican music, period. Among female performers of all genres, she toured the most, and she was the only Latina artist who had her own weekly radio program (*Contacto directo* con Jenni Rivera, on Entravision), her own reality television show (*I Love Jenni*, on Mun2), her own makeup and clothing lines, and

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her own foundation (the Jenni Rivera Love Foundation). To top it off, just weeks before her death, Rivera had signed a contract with ABC to produce and star in her own weekly television series *in English*. It was an unprecedented achievement for a Latin music artist. Jenni Rivera was on the brink of superstardom, and she knew it.

“Two thousand thirteen was going to be an incredible year,” Pete Salgado, who had been Rivera’s manager since 2004, told *Billboard*. “Our contract with ABC was going to be the first of its kind; she was going to be the first Latina to have her own series. And we were going to do it her way, with her as the producer. There were going to be a lot of ‘firsts.’ [ . . . ] At our production company, we were all really focused, aggressive, we were in the game. She was ready. And 2013 was going to be her year to be a mom. She was always saying she had spent so many years being the one supporting her children—like a dad—that now was the time to be a mom. Mom in the best sense of the word: cooking breakfast for her kids, taking them to school, going to conferences with their teachers. That’s why I say there’s no time to be sad. We have to finish what we started. We have to make sure her legacy goes on. Those kinds of artists come along once a generation. Jenni is unique. It’s going to be a long time before someone comes along who even comes close.”

The intention to keep Jenni’s legacy alive was clear at her funeral service, where many of her family members talked about her in the present tense, as if she were physically still there with them. No one was more moving than her son Johnny Lopez, eleven years old, and the last to speak, after all the rest of the family. “This is the hardest thing that I have ever had to go

THE RIVERA DYNASTY

through in my entire life,” he said, letting out a sigh, already demonstrating the Rivera clan’s characteristic poise. “I’ve had a short eleven years with my mom,” Johnny said. “But through those short eleven years she tried her best to set the best example that she could.” said Johnny, an adorable boy with round cheeks. “I have never seen a mother work so hard to accomplish everything, even get the groceries for her kids.” he went on, occasionally wiping at the tears streaming down his cheeks. “It’s a real honor to say that Jenni Rivera, the person that everyone is talking about, is my mom. That she lives on in me.”