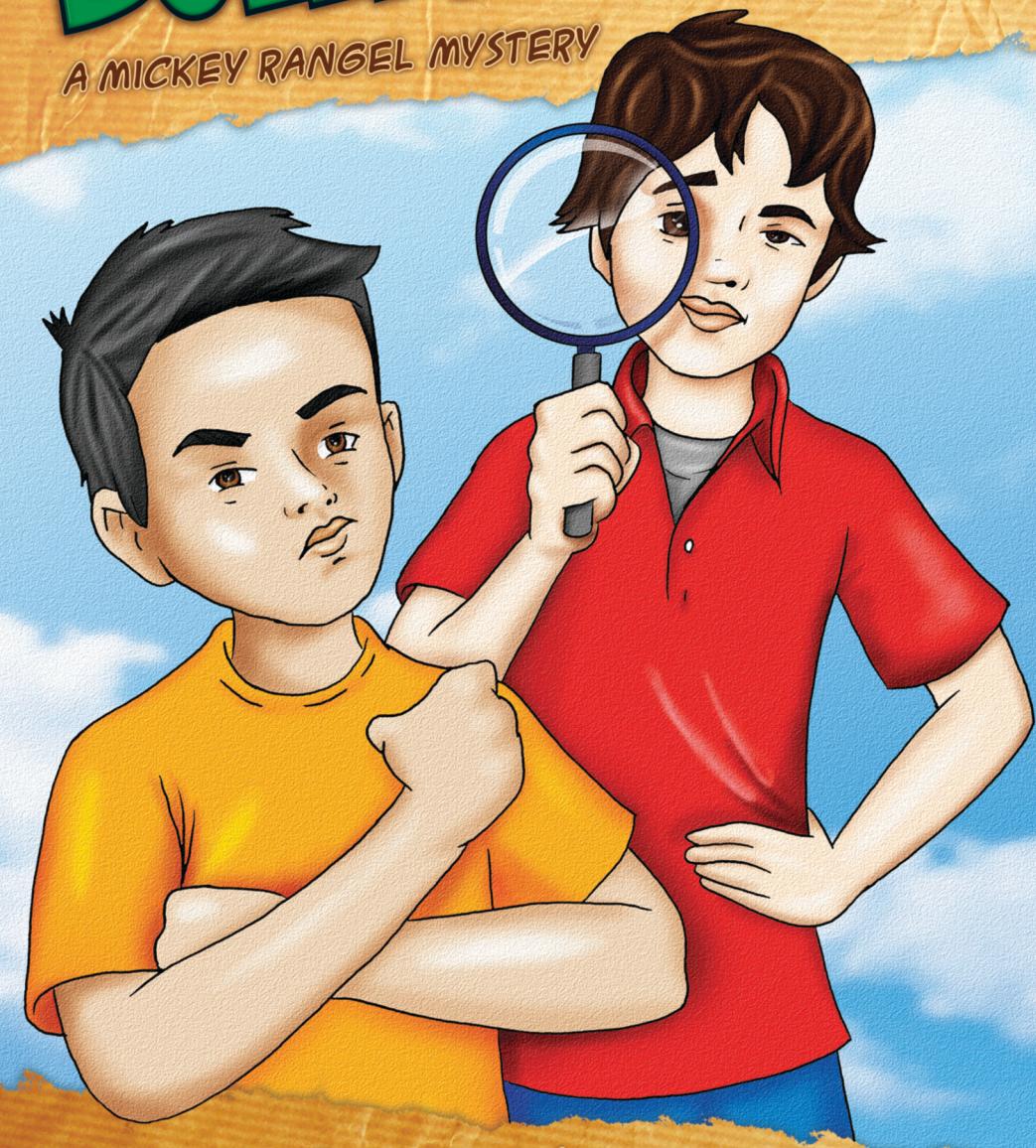


THE CURSE OF THE BULLY'S WRATH

A MICKEY RANGEL MYSTERY



BY RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR.

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For Tina
and
Lukas



OVER DINNER, I tell Mom and Dad about Marco, the new boy at school. I describe how for a small kid, he sure is mean as a skunk. Mom frowns at me. She doesn't like us talking ugly about anybody.

"I'm giving you the facts, ma'am, just the facts," I say. "For example, he struts up and down the hallways, his chest puffed out, his head tilted back just so and pity you if you happen to accidentally brush against him."

"That sounds more like pride than meanness," she says.

"Well, that's not the whole story," I say. "So, okay, today between classes Simón bumped into him by mistake—you know Simón, right?"

Dad says, "Simón Ortega, the football player?"

"He's the one, Dad. Anyway, Marco spun around so quick he was a blur. He was on Simón in a split second, pushing and shoving him. I could tell from the look on Simón's face he wasn't scared, big as he is, but that's probably also why he didn't want to fight back. Simón's at least a whole head and a half taller than Marco. Not to mention Simón's a linebacker for his football team. Big and solid. Dad,

I hear he's so good the high school coach has come to a few of his games to scout him. He's not even in middle school yet!"

"Is that right?" asks Dad.

"Sure is. Anyway," I continue, "Simón was telling him to knock it off. 'Stop pushing and shoving me'—things like that. But Marco kept at it and kept at it. Wouldn't let it go. So Simón finally said, 'You better quit it, squirt, if you know what's good for you.'"

I shove a forkful of spaghetti into my mouth and say, "You know what Marco does next, Dad?"

"Well, first," Mom interjects, "should you be talking with your mouth full?"

I shove another forkful of grub in my mouth and say, "No, ma'am."

Dad does his best not to laugh, but that only works for so long.

Mom punches me on the arm. "Don't be silly, *m'ijo*. Besides being rude showing everyone what you're eating, it's also gross."

Dad calms down and then says, "So, tell me, what did this boy do next? Show me an empty mouth first, though."

A joker, my dad. But I show him anyhow. All gone.

"You both are two peas in a pod," Mom says. "Now, tell us if you're going to tell us, Mickey. And make it quick—we all have other things to do."

I've done such a good job of building up to this point in my story that even Ricky is paying attention. Ricky's my twin. I'm older than him by a

whole 45 seconds. He's got issues being the baby brother. He's told me once or twice, "So what? As if 45 seconds means anything. It's not even a minute." I've answered, "It's long enough, Little Brother," which irks him to no end. He's never liked being called "Little" anything, but it is what it is.

Right now, though, I've got him eating out of the palm of my hand. Usually he wouldn't be paying attention and instead be distracted by the fly trying with all its might to break through the wire mesh of the window screen, or he'd be nodding off at the table. Always sleeping, which is why I think I beat him out of my mother's belly; he must've been snoozing. And like I learned during one of my online detective courses: "You snooze, you lose."

"Well, this Marco kid — who's puny — kicks Simón on the shin."

"Oh my," says Mom. "Did anyone do anything about it?"

"Sure, someone did something; Simón, that's who. He hopped on his one good leg, but Marco kicked at that one, too."

"What happened next?" Mom asks.

"Now with two bum legs, Simón lost his balance. He reached out to keep from falling, except he grabbed hold of Marco's shoulders and they both fell to the floor with a thud."

"Did anyone get hurt?" Mom wants to know.

"You mean, aside from Simón having to hobble around because Marco kicked him?"

Mom must've forgotten her rule about not talking with food in our mouths because here she is,

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moments later, talking with a mouthful of garlic bread. “Don’t be like that, *m’ijo*,” spitting out a few bits of her food.

Dad knows better than to point this out. So do I. And Dad simply smiles and gives me a wink.

“I guess it could’ve been worse, except Simón actually tried to keep them from falling so hard by rolling in such a way that Marco landed on top. But the force of the fall caused them to keep rolling, outwardly making it look like they were scuffling. And wouldn’t you know it, right at that moment when Simón’s on top of Marco, the assistant principal, Mr. Martínez, walks up. Of course it’s the big kid, the football player, who’s got the new boy—who’s tiny, like I’ve said—pinned to the floor.”

“Oh,” Mom says, “I see where this is going.”

“Sure enough,” Dad adds.

Ricky’s lost interest by now. He’s looking at the screened window where the fly is fighting for its freedom, though his eyelids are beginning to droop.

“Exactly. Simón gets up, tries to help Marco to his feet, and boy that kid can act. You would think he was a South American soccer player taking a flop because he acts so good, screaming at Simón, ‘Now you wanna help me up! You weren’t so friendly a few seconds ago when you threatened me just for bumping into you—by accident, I’ll have you know. What did you say to me? *Watch it, if you know what’s good for you?* Oh, I get it now! You’re being all nice to me because Mr. Martínez just showed up.’ Can you believe this kid? He’s got issues.”