

A MYSTERY BIGGER THAN BIG

A MICKEY RANGEL MYSTERY



BY RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR.

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for all my little brothers and sisters still on their journeys— prayers . . .
for Bill Broz, a dear friend, gone . . .
for the City of Houston and the Houston Arts Alliance . . .
for Tina, my heart, always . . .



ONE

RUMORS HAD BEEN FLYING over the last few days about the new girl in school. She arrived last Wednesday halfway through lunch. I'm not telling you anything new when I say that school lunches are not the best, but this girl ate it so quick that I wondered for a second whether she'd gotten something different than I had. When she was done, she sat in her spot quietly while the rest of us finished, then we got in line and headed back to English class. Mrs. Garza walked right beside her, her arm around the girl's skinny shoulders. When we got to class, we each took our seats, and Mrs. Garza pointed out an empty desk close to the front of the room, next to me to my left. The girl clasped her hands together in front of her and rested them on her desk, looking down at them the entire time. There were a few moments when she was so quiet that I seemed to forget she was there. I'd inadvertently look to my left, and she'd reappear. Until the next time that she disappeared. On and on like that, until Mrs. Garza introduced her.

Her name was Natalia. "Now," Mrs. Garza said, "say hello to our new friend," which we did in

unison. She never looked up, she never said hello back. She didn't blush or smile. This is how the rumors got started.

After school, Bucho, as only Bucho could, said, "She's hiding something. That's why she's keeping her mouth shut." What was she hiding, according to him? Her father was a drug lord in Mexico, and he and the girl's mother had been killed in a deal gone bad. It got worse. The girl had moved to South Texas from somewhere in "Old Mexico" because she had seen too much. She had made it out alive and was a witness. If she hadn't escaped she would have suffered at the hands of the murderous gang. "These guys live by a code. If a witness is dead, she can't talk," he said. And worse. The girl *had* testified against some bad people and had gone into protective custody, and so on and so on. An already bizarre story growing more and more outlandish. But that was just like Bucho, my archnemesis from the time we were in diapers. There's a picture of the two of us at a birthday party for a neighbor kid. We were literally in diapers. Ricky, my twin brother, was in my mother's arms asleep, as usual. I was sitting in the sandbox, my back to Bucho. Without me knowing, his fists were filled with sand, and when the picture was taken, he was on the verge of dumping both fists onto my head. Once a bully, always a bully.

Today, he didn't like being told his ideas were dumb. So when I pointed out his stories were absolute fabrications, true to form, he leaned in face to face with me, growled a threat and gave me a head butt. Like that made his ideas right all of a sudden.

