

Web of the Spider

by
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HAWKER BROWNLOW
E D U C A T I O N

1 DALTON CALMLY STEPPED past the three gunmen. He hardly looked at them.

Then he turned to the sweating gangster who stood in the doorway. "It's a little too late for that, Kreft," he said, pointing to the guns. "Maybe you didn't hear the whistle go off, but it's quitting time. The cops are on the way."

Kreft growled. "You just wouldn't stop, would you, Dalton? Not until you ruined my whole operation. But how did you ever find me out? Nobody ever even suspected me. Not until you came along!"

Dalton gave a cold smile. "I just used my eyes. And my nose. A rat always smells like a rat."

Outside, police sirens could be heard. Dalton looked out the window. "Better put away those popguns, boys. Company's here."

Dalton gave the gangster one last smile. Then as coolly as he had come in, he walked out the door.

Julio Serrano shut the book and smiled.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. *The Spider's Parlor* had to be the best one yet in the Dalton series.

Dalton was smart and tough. Probably the smartest, toughest private eye anywhere. When the book had started out, Dalton had looked like he was going to be caught in the spider's web—or "parlor." But by the end, it was Krefl and the other hoods who'd been trapped in Dalton's web.

Julio sighed. He'd never dare tell anybody, but he dreamed of being just like Dalton.

Picking up the book again, Julio turned back to one of his favorite parts. He was just getting to the place where Dalton hit two hoods when—

"Julio!" It was his mother. "Julio, Rod's here."

Julio slammed the book shut and rolled over to stare at the ceiling. He tried hard. But he couldn't get the picture of Rod's grinning face out of his mind.

I wish I were Dalton, Julio thought. I'd snag that stupid Rodrigo Sanchez in the

biggest web you ever saw. He'd struggle like crazy, but he'd only get trapped worse. And then he'd never bother us again.

"Julio!" his mother called again. "Want to say hi to Rod?"

No, he really didn't want to say hi to Rod. Or anything else. Instead, he thought about Rodrigo trying to get out of the sticky web, pulling this way and that. Not even those big muscles could do him any good.

It was those muscles and that thick, curly hair that made women fall for him. His mother liked Rod's dark eyes too. But to Julio, it seemed as if they hid many secrets—most of them bad.

In fact, most of Rod's life was a secret. He just blew in one day from Texas like he'd burned his bridges behind him. But his blank past hadn't kept him from getting a job. In this city, such a big man had no trouble getting construction work.

And in this city, Julio and Rod might have gone all of their lives without seeing each other. So why did Rod have to

see Julio's mother in the park, her pretty, black hair blowing in the wind? Why did he have to come calling with his stupid flowers?

For three years, Julio had been the man of his family. That had been his role since his father had died in a construction accident. There had been no one else to take the load.

At eleven, Julio still missed his father. But he knew his father would be proud of him. Julio had taken care of his mother and two small sisters as his father would have wished.

Not that Julio wanted the job forever. He knew that his mother was often lonely. If some good man came along, Julio would have welcomed him. He was sure of that.

But Rodrigo wasn't such a man. Oh, he acted friendly. But deep down in his heart, he was *malo*. Perhaps he was even a crook running from the law.

"Julio!" His mother's voice said she was tired of waiting.

Julio got off his bed and slowly headed

out the door. When he was halfway down the hall, he saw Rodrigo standing there in his work clothes. Julio's own father had come home from work sweaty and dirty too. But he had quickly washed and put on clean clothes.

This man had come right from the job. Now he stood in Julio's house covered with sweat and grime.

Dirty cockroach! Did he have no respect for Julio's mother?

"Hi, Julio," Rodrigo said. "I just stopped by to see if you want to go to the game Friday. I got a couple of tickets. Bet you're a big Lakers fan like me, eh?" He was grinning, but it didn't make him look any better to Julio.

"I'm busy Friday," Julio said. He looked at his mother and asked, "Can I go now? I was doing something."

"Oh, Julio!" his mother sighed. Julio took her answer as a release and went back to his room. As he closed his door, he heard his mother tell Rodrigo she was sorry. Then he heard the front door open and close. The roar of Rod's truck