

# THE CASE OF THE PEN GONE MISSING

A MICKEY RANGEL MYSTERY



BY RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR.

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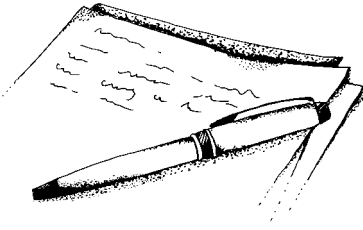
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**T**HE DAY TOOTS RODRÍGUEZ WALKED UP TO ME DURING morning recess was sunny, windless and hot. I was standing over on the monkey bars side of the playground under the shade of a mesquite tree drinking my Yoo-Hoo. I was caught off guard when she said, “Hey, Mickey.” I nearly blew chocobubbles out through my nostrils. You see, Toots Rodríguez is one of the most pretty girls in the fifth grade, if not the prettiest. She has long, curly brown hair, green eyes, and a smile that could tame a raging tiger.

Toots Rodríguez never talks to me. Not even in class. Not even when we’re supposed to be working together on a group project, like that frog dissection last month. She just sat at our table and wrote notes to Bucho, her longtime boyfriend, my longtime archnemesis. All the while, my twin brother, Ricky, and I sliced open the frog, pinned its sides down, tagged the various parts we could identify, and drew our findings on onionskin paper. Not even a “Thank you, guys” when the “group” scored an A+ on our project.

And so today, when she said, “Hey,” eyeballed my Yoo-Hoo, and sighed — let’s just say my heart did

a couple of backflips inside my chest. "Yes?" I managed to say.

Her bottom lip quivered, and what a sucker I am for that. "What's wrong, Toots?"

"It's just . . . ," she began, placing a hand of feather-light fingers on my wrist. She covered her eyes with her other hand and then she was boohooing away.

I'm a sucker for that, too. And I was in no mood to put up with anyone even thinking of hurting Toots. Not even if this was the first time she'd spoken to me since we napped side by side in kindergarten. I took her hand in mine and said, "Listen, Toots, whatever it is that's bothering you, you can tell me. You can count on me to help."

"Really?" she said. She was wearing a gold charm bracelet that jingled every time she pushed curls from her eyes.

I nodded enthusiastically. Then I stopped, so as not to come across as overly eager.

"But . . ."

"Go on," I said. "Spill it. What's going on?"

"Okay, Mickey. I've come to you because I think I'm in trouble, and I know you're a kind of detective. I can't figure out who else can help me but you."

She was wrong. I wasn't "a kind of detective." I was the real deal. I got a badge and a certificate when I completed a few online courses two years ago. Never mind all the detective books I'd read. Halfway through most of them I'd already figured out who the murderer was, but I kept reading through to the last page just to compare how I

arrived at my answers versus how the authors did. Both in school and in the neighborhood, I'd solved enough mysteries that I'd gained a rock-solid reputation as a gumshoe, a private eye. So Toots had misspoken when she referred to me as "a kind of detective." But I let it go. Those green eyes welling up with tears—it was enough to break a guy's heart.

She continued, "There's a rumor going around that I stole Eddy's dad's fancy pen, the one with the White House logo on it, and the president's signature."

"President Lee Black?"

She nodded and sniffled.

"The one Eddy brought in for show-and-tell this morning?"

"Yes, yes. That's the one, and I heard someone telling someone else I was the last one with it. Now it's gone, and so who else but me could've—I can't even say it," she whispered, "*stolen it*. Oh, what will I do?"

"Were you the last one to have the pen?"

"Yes, for goodness sakes, yes, Mickey. I had it, but I put it back in his cubbyhole. And people are saying I *stole* it from him." She whispered that word again, and this time she looked around to see if anyone had heard her.

I looked at her. Those big green eyes, they were a dam getting ready to burst with tears, and she pushed her hair back off her right shoulder.

"You have to believe me, Mickey. I didn't take the pen. I didn't."