

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISCHIEVOUS MARKER

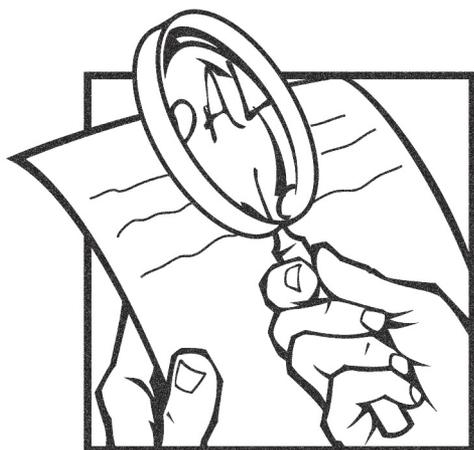
A MICKEY RANGEL MYSTERY



BY RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISCHIEVOUS MARKER

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POR RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR.



PIÑATA BOOKS
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for Mark Tristán, a fighter
also for Tina, Lukas, Mikah, Jakob and Kalyn

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Summary: School principal Mrs. Abrego and nemesis Bucho both ask detective Mickey Rangel to help unmask the vandal who has been writing messages all over the school walls.

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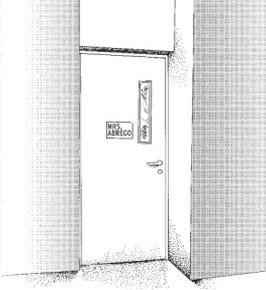
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The Mystery of the Mischievous Marker

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ONE

This morning, I found myself sitting on the hot seat; yep, the principal's office. I don't mind telling you, it was working the way it's meant to work. I was sweating bullets. A fifth grader is never summoned to Mrs. Abrego's office just for the fun of it. Kids get called in for one of two reasons: they're either selling chocolate bars as a fundraiser for the student council (it was common knowledge that Mrs. A was a sucker for the almond variety), or they've done something they shouldn't have been doing, and they got caught.

I wasn't in the student council, so that told me I wasn't there because Mrs. A was looking to satisfy her craving for candy bars. For the life of me, though, I could not come up with a reason why else I was sitting in this very uncomfortable leather chair. I hadn't done anything that warranted being pulled out of homeroom the moment I set foot in the classroom, anyway. I was trying to remain calm, to stay cool. First rule of interrogation that I learned from my online course on Private Investigative techniques was: "To keep them guessing, play it like Baby Bear: not too cool, not too hot, but just right." Okay, that



pertained to the one asking the questions, but I figured it applied to the one getting grilled, too. Try as I might to be cool as a cucumber, though, I could not help but be nervous and know the jitters were beginning to show: in the sweat streaming down my face, my left eye twitching and my slight rocking back and forth. Without knowing my crime, it was obvious on my face I'd done it, whatever "it" was.

It didn't help either that as soon as she asked me to take a seat she shuffled some papers on her desk, and without looking at me, said, "Sit tight, Rangel. I'll be right back." She got up, walked to the door, stood there a few moments without saying a word, sighed, then left me alone in her office. Did I say she left me all by myself? In her office? Part of her grand master plan, I was sure of it. If, as a private detective, I ever needed to find out some key information on a case from a meany, I'd leave him alone, too. Let him stew. Which was all good and well when you were the one stepping out, not the one left behind. It was nerve-wracking.

Making matters worse was that overhead, running approximately the length of her desk, was a row of track lights, each of the fixtures pointed strategically at my face. Cause number two for my sweating like an ice cube on a South Texas summer day. In other words, bucket loads.

To help pass the time, to help keep myself from throwing my body onto the floor in a fetal position like a baby sucking his thumb, I studied my surroundings. Something else I learned from my online courses: "Get to know where you're at, because

wherever you find yourself, there you are." There I was, and so, first, I surveyed her desk, the sort of desk one would expect to find in principals' offices around the world: on the dark side of cherry wood, but most likely not actual wood but particle board instead. Covering the top was a sheet of clear glass, under which she kept photos, mostly of her children, if I had to guess. One of a boy and a little girl during what I surmised to be Halloween, because the boy was decked out in a zombie outfit and the little girl was dressed as a pink unicorn, both of them carrying their jack-o-lantern baskets. His was the hard orange plastic variety, hers a soft plush. Across the bottom of the photo the names Aaron and Bella were written in clean block letters on a sticky note, followed by the year. The other photos were of the family and friends kind. Nothing really stuck out except for the one of the kids, which reminded me of mine and Ricky's Halloween this past year. I had made an oversized stool out of cardboard. I had cut a hole on the seat to fit my head through. Ricky, my twin brother, dressed like a pigeon, though most people where we trick-or-treated mistook him for a turkey. They just didn't get the joke. More times than not, we had to explain it: "You see, I'm a stool, Ricky's a pigeon. So, we're a stool pigeon. Get it? You know, the bad guy in crime novels who's a tattle tale?" It was really disappointing after all the work we put into our costumes. I think we decided that if we go out next Halloween, we'd dress up as super heroes.