

THE GOLDEN HAVANA NIGHT

A Sherlock Homie Mystery



"The Cuba sequences are gripping, and it's hard to resist [this] hero . . ."

—Kirkus Reviews

Manuel Ramos

Praise for the work of Manuel Ramos

“Ramos vividly and affectionately portrays the Mile High City’s Mexican-American heritage and culture.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *My Bad*

“Manuel Ramos is one of my all-time favorite authors and in *My Bad* he delivers everything I look for in a noir tale. Gus Corral is the guy I want on my side if I’m in trouble and Ramos proves once again he is the master of creating great characters. Clear your schedule and be prepared to read this blitz attack of noir in one sitting.”

—Jon Jordan, *Crimespree Magazine*, on *My Bad*

“Ramos explores issues of the border, identity, violence and slights from outside the community, as well as within. They are thought-provoking and unpredictable. Many linger long after they end; and often they contain depth charges that explode in the reader’s mind after the story has ended. His novels belong on your bookshelves.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books* on
The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories

“Manuel Ramos has a well-earned reputation for writing gritty stories about Latinos, stories that grab you by the throat. The richness of Ramos’ work is evident in *The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories*. The stories are clever and sometimes funny, but their real strength is the way they capture today’s Latinos—the talk and humor, the swagger and irony. Ramos has a rich voice. He nails it.”

—*The Denver Post* on *The Skull of
Pancho Villa and Other Stories*

“Ramos puts Latinos back in the picture. He is known as a crime writer, but that doesn’t quite capture what he does. His books are love stories, political dramas, mordant cautionary tales. Characters who are Latino, black and white, artists, professionals and laborers, are described in staccato chapters, like a catchy corrido.”

—*Los Angeles Times* on *The Skull of
Pancho Villa and Other Stories*

“The Godfather of Chicano noir hits us hard with this collection. Great range, dark visions and lots of mojo—much of it bad to the bone. A fine book!”

—Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *Into the Beautiful North*,
on *The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories*

“As invigorating as a dip in a Rocky Mountain stream.”

—*Mystery Scene* on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“A dark mix of North Denver gangsters and Catholicism, but it’s [the] setting that really grips readers. Nostalgia is combined with reality . . . Ramos gets it right.” —*Denver Post* on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“Manuel Ramos captures Denver’s Latino North Side in the same intense way that Walter Mosley depicts black L.A. It’s all here in a gripping dark mystery: the gritty landscape, the racial tension, the conflict between native and newcomer, the violence and gangs and street loyalties as strong as family ties. No outsider could write about North Denver with such feeling and understanding. A startling novel.”

—Sandra Dallas, *New York Times* best-selling author,
on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“Manuel Ramos has taken the best elements of classic noir—the loser anti-hero, urban grittiness, thuggish cops and femme fatales, double and triple crosses—and updated them for the age of Obama. Money, sex and greed figure prominently in the story but so do class tensions, barrio culture and a multicultural milieu. Ramos handles all of these elements with a deft hand that keeps the story moving and, while avoiding any overt messaging, creates an up-to-the-minute portrait of the new America. I loved this book!”

—Michael Nava, author of the
Henry Rios Mystery series, on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“A very impressive debut.”

—*Los Angeles Times* on *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*

“A thickly atmospheric first novel—with just enough mystery to hold together a powerfully elegiac memoir of the heady early days of Chicano activism.” —*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*

“Ramos succeeds brilliantly in marrying style and substance to form a seamlessly entertaining novel [with] characters and scenes deeply etched with admirable brevity and skill.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review, on *Blues for the Buffalo*

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Manuel Ramos



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For my mother, Emma.





Thank you, Flo, my co-conspirator.



He knew he'd killed another dream but must
accept the consequences.

—Leonardo Padura, *Havana Blue*

There is nothing tougher than a tough Mexican, just as there is
nothing gentler than a gentle Mexican, nothing more honest
than an honest Mexican, and above all nothing
sadder than a sad Mexican.

—Philip Marlowe, private investigator,
in Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*

PROLOGUE

He shivered in the cold Colorado morning. The sun was but a pale ball in the gray sky. It provided little warmth. He blew stale air on his hands.

Weather was an illusion. He knew the difference between illusion and the real. Real surrounded him: the rifle, his plan, the details that had to work for him to move forward. His commitment. As real as it gets.

He'd scouted the shot when he could. Not every day, but enough. It had taken time, but he had plenty of that. More than he needed.

He leaned once more into his Barrett M82, and sighted it to the spot on the highway where the target would stop. The weapon was ready. He believed he was, too.

From his position on the rise, he had clear sight to the entrance ramp. Every minute, more traffic rushed through the entrance to merge with the southbound lanes of I-25. The oblivious commuters had no idea they were only extras in the scene he directed. They couldn't imagine, much less experience, the emotions he stored and which were about to be released with justice and penance.

The homeless beggar, his unwitting accomplice, would walk through the traffic to his place near the top of the ramp. The homeless man broke the law by standing there, and each time he did, he brought the wave of cars, trucks and vans to a sudden slowdown. The police would eventually take him away, but he would return the next day or the day after. The pattern had been established. It was what the shooter needed.

The target invariably slowed down as he waited his turn to drive around the panhandler, the scene was always the same, and at the same time—between seven and seven thirty-five. The metallic red E300 Mercedes would stop, the target would shake his head, curse the beggar. But no matter how many times the beggar

stalled him, the target used the same route from his house to his office. Every morning, like clockwork.

There were other variables, tiny things that could go wrong and keep him from pulling the trigger. Had to be textbook. He waited for the right shot, the right time. The *perfect* time. He'd passed up two opportunities already; he might again if he didn't feel good about the shot.

The red car pulled into the lane to catch I-25 South.

The beggar's dirty fingers gripped a cardboard sign. His hands were half-covered with raggedy mittens. Today the sign read, "Any kindness will help. God Bless You."

The target inched forward, stopped.

The shooter adjusted his scope, breathed.

The target's head was centered. He smoked a cigarette this morning in the luxury of his automobile. His chin bounced to the rhythm of whatever nonsense he listened to on his radio.

From experience, the shooter knew that only that chin and lower jaw would remain connected to the target's body after the bullet did its work.

The shooter felt the calm overtake him. He'd done this far too many times to doubt that he would succeed.

He caressed the gun, squeezed the trigger in sync with his breath. He prepared for the recoil by relaxing even more.

In the blink of an eye, red explosion bloomed inside the car—that and a splatter on the windshield. The shooter watched the Mercedes jerk forward into the rear of the car at the head of the line. He gave himself just a split second to confirm, to savor, then began moving mechanically; he broke down the weapon, packed his gear, slung the canvas bag over his shoulder. He slipped away while horns honked on the street below. He scurried to the bike path and walked a mile before he stopped.

He'd done it. He felt good, successful.

Next, he would find Corrine Coral and bring it all to an end. He hoped Gus wouldn't interfere. He'd deal with him, if necessary.

For the first time in a long time he was complete. Justified. At peace.

Part One

- Chapter 1 -

THE HOOCHIE COOCHIE MAN

Joaquín “Kino” Machaco didn’t have an appointment but that didn’t stop the all-star center fielder for the Colorado Rockies from coming through the door and planting himself right in front of me. He leaned in, knuckles resting on my desk, his jaw tight. I couldn’t see anything in my office except the bulk of his chest and the shiny sweat on his face.

The brass plaque on the office door said, *Agustín Corral—Investigator*. Agustín is my given name, but to any and all I was Gus. That day, Gus was the unwelcome focus of Kino Machaco’s undivided attention.

“I got a problem,” he said. “A personal problem. I heard you were the guy to help me.”

The ballplayer loomed over me like a gorilla about to smash a termite nest. I pushed back my chair to open breathing space between us.

“Sit down. Let’s talk. Maybe I can help. Maybe not.”

His eyes moved left and right as though my words were nonsense.

“Why wouldn’t you help me?”

It wasn’t really a question. More like a warning.

“I didn’t say that. Easy. Sit down. Let’s talk. Tell me about your problem.”

Kino sat down with a thud. The reupholstered chair groaned under his weight. I’d found the chair at Goodwill and replaced one of the legs as well as the ripped fabric. Kino could put a quick end to the chair’s newly revived life.

“I don’t know if I can help,” I said. “That’s all I’m saying. I usually work for lawyers—sometimes they use me like an investigator, but I can clean windows and throw out the trash,

too.” I gave him my *howdy, new customer* grin, but he continued to glare at me. I replaced my wasted smile with a look that was all-business.

“Like a utility player? Pinch-hitter, maybe?”

Machaco’s Cuban accent played with my ears. I heard “peencheeter.” He occasionally lapsed into Spanish, and the accent clung to each of his English words, but he was sincere and convincing, not at all what I expected. The smooth swing that ESPN highlighted almost every week was matched by his smooth style of talking, smiling and dressing. *Suave*, as my neighborhood pals used to say.

The man’s neat beard covered the lower half of his face. The top of his head was a glistening bronze globe of naked skin. The famous tattooed forearms, responsible for hitting at least forty homers during a half-dozen seasons, rested across his chest, but his fingers and hands moved constantly.

Almost ten years before, Kino Machaco had defected from Cuba to play ball in the United States. He was a teenager when he made his move. At the time, the story ran for several days, especially the part about his sprint through the Washington, D.C. airport to a waiting car that sped through a rainy night to the U.S. Embassy. After the legal maneuvers stopped and Fidel Castro was somehow compensated and the headlines quieted down, the Colorado Rockies tied him up with a truckload of money and a tightly written, long-term contract. He spent a year and a half in the minors, then made a big splash in his major league debut. *Rookie of the Year*, as I remembered. *Savior of the Woeful Rockies*, for sure, and at last.

I picked up a pen and was about to ask him some basic questions when he said, “The lawyer, the old guy, retired. He said you could help. Never mind you’re not a lawyer. That’s why I’m here.”

I’d thought as much. My pal Luis M3nchez had sent another client my way. His last two referrals never paid their bills, and one tried to beat me up. Kino Machaco had money. At least that was an improvement.

“He must have told you all I do is simple stuff. I haven’t had my investigator’s license very long.”

“*Sí, me dijo.* I don’t need no detective. Don’t need no license. I need someone who can help.”

He looked me over like I was a prize hog at the state fair and he was the grill master at a BBQ joint.

I straightened my posture and stretched my chest. “With what? Let’s start there.”

He finally quit moving his hands. He stared over my shoulder and out my solitary office window at the beautiful view of the overflowing alley dumpster.

“You never say nothing about this to no one, okay?”

I nodded. “It’s confidential,” I said. “Unless you tell me you’re gonna rob a bank or kill someone.”

He jerked his head back in my direction.

“I ain’t robbing a bank. Or killing no one.”

“Just tell me what your problem is.”

The chair made a noise like a tree limb breaking as he stood up and paced around my crowded office.

“I live with my brother here in the States,” he said. “My only family in this country. He’s got a special visa so he’s not illegal. The team, the Rockies, they handled my brother’s paperwork and other legal stuff so I could focus on playing ball. I’d be all alone if Alberto wasn’t here.”

“I get it.”

“So, it’s important that he be here.”

“Sure, I understand.”

“But not if it means he could get hurt.”

“Is someone threatening him?”

He stopped his aimless walking and went back to looking at the alley *basura*. He nodded. “Yeah. I been getting messages, through my sister back on the island. There’s a guy, a bad guy. Miguel Almeida. He’s telling her that Alberto owes him money and that if he doesn’t take care of his debt, something’s going to happen. Something bad.”

“To your brother? Or you?”

He shrugged. He clasped his hands together and raised them over his head. "Maybe me. Maybe Alberto. Or my sister, Lourdes."

He sat down again. The chair wobbled, and Kino grabbed the edge of my desk to steady himself. "I just . . . I just don't know," he said.

"Is the threat that serious to you if he's in Cuba and you're here? In the States?"

He muttered something I couldn't hear.

"What did you say?"

He straightened his back. "I said, this guy could hurt any one of us, whenever he wants. He has business in Florida, and connections in New York. He could come for me wherever he wants."

Spring training was set to start in another week. Kino Machaco wouldn't have his head in the game if he thought his brother or his sister, or he himself, was someone's target. How could he play ball if he worried about who sat in the stands?

"Don't you have to leave for Arizona? Most of the team is already down in Scottsdale, aren't they?"

I could take or leave Denver professional sports. I'd occasionally watch a Broncos game with my sister Corrine or a few old friends, especially if the team was in the playoffs, but, unlike thousands of Denver football freaks, I didn't stroke out if they lost to the Raiders or they couldn't find a solid quarterback. Nuggets? I could do without. Avalanche? What was it they played again? Rockies? I'd been to a few games with the lawyer, M3n1ez, who had a love-hate thing with that team.

I did read the sports pages almost every day. Not because I was a fanatic, but because those pages always had stories right out of a soap opera or *telenovela*: drugs, divorces, assaults, betrayals, health crises and the occasional poor boy or girl makes good. Pure entertainment. My kind of reading. But if it was up to me only, I could think of plenty of other ways to spend the sizable chunk of change it cost to watch millionaires make more millions playing children's games while they generated even many more millions for the team owners, league bosses and TV executives.