

MY BAD

A Mile High Noir

Manuel Ramos

"Clear your schedule and be prepared to read this blitz attack of noir in one sitting."

—Jon Jordan, *Crimespree Magazine*

Praise for the work of Manuel Ramos:

“One thing is almost as certain as death and corruption: Manuel Ramos’ Chicano angst. You’ll find plenty of all three in his jazzy, fast-paced and delirious whodunits, which stand as an unparalleled achievement in American crime literature.”

—Ilan Stavans

“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 book shelves.”

—*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*, a collection of previously published short 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. Gus Corral is a zero, a smart but underachieving Chicano who has missed the brass ring of life. He has been reduced to working in his ex-wife’s secondhand shop in the gentrifying Denver neighborhood where he grew up, when Artie Baca, his high school running buddy turned successful realtor, turns up looking for Gus’s help to buy off an extortionist. Old ties and the promise of a thousand dollar pay-off get Gus to agree to Artie’s plea for help, but then Artie is murdered. What follows is a ride through the underside of the American Dream as Gus sets out to find out what really happened to Artie Baca. Money, sex and greed figure prominently in the story but so do class tensions, barrio culture and a multi-cultural 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*

“Manuel Ramos’s brilliant and gripping *Desperado* features unforgettable characters, a propulsive plot, and the sharpest delineation of the life and geography of north Denver I have ever read. *Desperado* fully engages the reader from the first page, and I heartily recommend it.”

—Diane Mott Davidson, New York Times
bestselling author of the Goldy the caterer series,
on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“Manuel Ramos’ Gus Corral is a hard luck individual for whom life hasn’t quite panned out like he planned. But when an old friend is murdered, Gus finds himself on unfamiliar ground where danger comes at him hot and heavy. He just might get to the truth—if he doesn’t get his head bashed in first. *Desperado: A Mile High Noir* is a terrific read.”

—Gary Phillips, author of *Warlord of Willow Ridge*,
on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

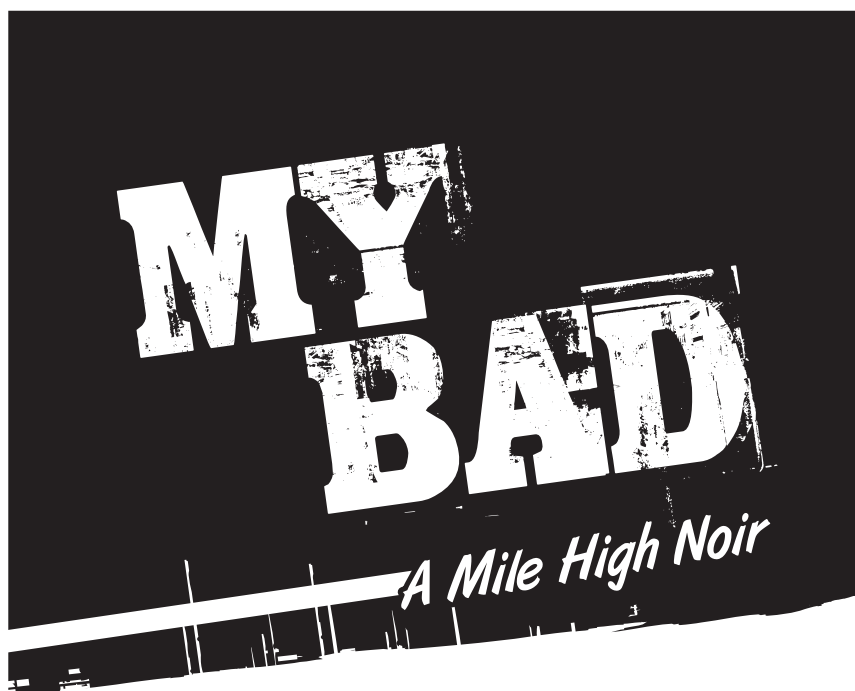
“A very impressive debut.” —*Los Angeles Times* on *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*

“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*



Manuel Ramos



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This story is told by two people—Luis M3nchez, the lawyer, and Gus Corral, the investigator.

For my son and daughter Diego and Verlyn.
Shout-out to #1 fans Veronica & Darold and María & Neil.

Mil gracias to Guillermo Garibay, attorney-at-law, for his
legal insights about an early version of this book.

Prologue

The big man waited at the back door of the low ugly building. He stood next to a pickup. The snow was light but it would be heavy in another hour. Grab the money and run.

The double-sized door opened and a bearded man dressed in jeans and a greasy flannel shirt walked out. A cloud of vapor floated from his mouth. "Hey, it's cold out here," Eugene Eccles said.

"Yeah, tell me about it. You took your sweet time about opening the damn door."

"You are Toby King, right?"

"You expecting someone else?"

Eccles thought that Toby King did not look like a Toby King. More like a José or a Juan or a Carlos. Gonzales or Martínez, maybe. Something Mexican. But the customer was always right.

"No. It's just that usually we load through the front, Mr. King. We don't often use this back door. Since you said you had a bigger load . . . guess it's okay. Hope it fits in the unit. How big is your box of stuff?"

He peered into the truck's empty bed.

"Uh, where's your stuff?"

King pulled a gun from the deep pocket of his coat.

"Get back in. Number one forty-three. Now."

Eccles led the way down the narrow hallway until they stopped at door 143.

"Open it."

Eccles used the ring of keys hanging from his belt. The door opened with a loud grating noise.

King pushed Eccles into the small room, then smashed him on the side of the head with the gun. Eccles collapsed on the concrete floor. A red line of blood creased the side of his face. King rushed

to the box in the middle of the floor. He grabbed the top flaps and tore them open. Something was wrong. The box was too light.

"Where's the goddamn money?" he shouted at the unconscious Eccles.

King grabbed Eccles under the shoulders and dragged him to the hallway. He closed 143, found the right key on the bleeding man's key ring and opened 144 across the hall. He pushed Eccles into 144, shut the door and locked Eccles and himself in the dark.

He didn't want to, but he had to wait for the lawyer. Goddamn Luis M3nchez. He knew something about the money. Why else was he coming to this place? Toby King spit on the wall.

"I'll have to kill him, too," he whispered to the man on the floor. He hoped he'd be finished by the time the storm hit.

Part One

What's The Worst That Can Happen?

1 [Gus]

*stone free to do what I please
stone free to ride the breeze*

I stepped away from prison trying to convince myself that I was on the way to a new and better life. My mind had turned to mush but my body was hard. The pen will do that. I told anyone who asked that I was okay, considering. And I had every intention of doing the right thing.

That first night out was weird. Not sure what I expected. I wasn't ready, that was obvious. Corrine, my sister, picked me up at the halfway house right before lunch, nervous about what to say to me. She'd organized a welcome home party and several of her friends began dropping by in the early afternoon, more for Corrine than for me. Eventually Max, another sister, and my long-time pals, Ice and Shoe, walked in. Max's girlfriend, Sandy, aka La Sandra, showed up a few minutes after Max. Jerome, one more old friend, popped in for a hot minute, then he split. Said he had a business meeting. We didn't know whether to believe him.

Shoe, real name Tony Vega, was the jock of the group. Taller than the rest of us, he still looked like he could play a mean pickup game at the rec center. Ice, real name David Zamarripa—a name I'd almost forgotten since I never used it—was the would-be musician, which made him the lover boy in the group. He worked for the City and County of Denver as a maintenance man. I wasn't sure how Shoe made his living.

I'd missed these guys. They had my back since high school, and I had theirs. At least, that's the way I thought about them.

The partiers were in a good mood and they all took pains to make me believe they really cared that I was back. The stories about my arrest and the whole mess with the Mexican gangsters and the

kidnapping and Corrine's awesome escape were told again, but this time we could laugh about some of what had happened. None of us talked about the blood or bodies or the fear. The party went late but I didn't drink too much. One half-hearted beer, if you can believe that. You'd think I would get all crazy and loose. You'd be wrong.

I worried about showing too high of an alcohol level when I met my parole officer and he gave me the mandatory tests, but that wasn't the reason I held back.

Of course, booze wasn't the only available drug. Shoe asked me if I wanted to get high.

"I have some bud, bud. All legal, too."

"I guess that's how it is now, right?"

"It's like the world changed overnight," Ice said. His red eyes and goofy grin gave away that he'd already sampled Shoe's product. "Marijuana stores popped up everywhere. Over on my block, there's three different ones. Opening day was a circus. Lines of pot heads around the block. I got really stoned." He giggled, tried to cover his mouth with his hand. He couldn't keep it in and he gave up and walked away.

"I better pass," I said to Shoe. "I have to meet with my P.O. tomorrow. You know what that means."

"But it's legal," Shoe insisted.

"Except for me," I answered.

The highlight of the night turned out to be Max excitedly announcing that she and Sandy were finally getting married. We toasted the couple and cheered the progressive voters of Colorado because Max's marriage would be legit and official. The party turned into a celebration of Max's longest-lasting relationship until the happy pair had to leave for their band's show at a club in Capitol Hill.

A vibe floated through the remaining group, something gray and heavy that laid on my shoulders like a sack of dead fish. Maybe it was only my imagination. I fought the feeling, but the tricks I used in prison when the dark took over were missing. No weights

for lifting, no yard for running, no sympathetic counselor who would listen to anything I said until her shift was over.

I was thankful when the party finally ended and I made my way to Corrine's basement, my new home until I found something I could manage on my own.

"You can stay as long as you want, you know that," Corrine said. She carried blankets and a pillow.

"Yeah, I know. But I don't want to mooch. That's got to stop, know what I mean?"

"You're not mooching. I want to help. You got a bad deal with the cops, you took the hit for everything but I know you didn't do all that stuff that the cops, especially Reese, said you did. You're my brother, Gus. In this house, that means something."

I smiled at her, gave her a hug and said, "Without a doubt. Thank you."

She hugged back. We finished making the bed.

"Goodnight, Gus. I'm glad you're home."

Home. What a concept. But all that time I'd had to think prison, you know, made my hard head open up to the idea that I needed, and wanted, some of the comforts I'd never given much thought to in the past. Like a home. Family. Decent job. Peace.

I shared the basement with a cat or two and Corrine's CDs and record albums. Stacks of Chicago blues, sixties and seventies rock, Tejano and Mexican, and a handful of Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan and other outlaws were scattered against walls, on makeshift shelves, and in a scratched and peeling cabinet. She'd inherited my father's vinyl collection and added a few of her own CDs to the mix. I dusted off and plugged in an old turntable. When I turned it on, the knobs lit up and the needle arm moved so I figured it worked. I found a pair of gigantic headphones that plugged into the turntable. Then I spent an hour listening to scratchy blues legends. I read about many of the musicians and their songs in prison. I read a lot in lockup. Thanks to Corrine's basement, I finally heard the music. The blues seemed to fit my lifestyle, attitude, outlook on life in general.

I had only one nightmare that night. In my opinion, I slept like a baby—first time in months.

The next day, I finalized the details of my parole at an office across from the courthouse. First, I met the man who ran the program, Ed Dillings. Thin wispy curls circled his ears. He didn't have enough hair to cover the shine beaming off his huge forehead.

"Mr. Agustín Corral? You go by Gus?"

"That's me."

"I'm Ed Dillings." He extended his hand and I shook it. He held on to my fingers rather than shake them. "I'm the director of this office. Any problems, issues, controversy—you bring them to your assigned P.O. If he can't handle them to your satisfaction, come to me." I jerked my hand loose. "But don't try any ex-con bullshit. Be real, that's all I ask."

"Yeah, sure, okay. But you're not the person I report to?"

"No. Your regular contact will be Harold Mills. You'll meet him in a few minutes. He's been with the office about five years now, so he knows the deal. I'm sure you do, too. I won't waste too much of your time today. I just want to be clear that our job is to ensure your transition back into the world is as problem-free as possible. But we can't do that by ourselves. You have to be invested in your future, your own life, if you hope to avoid recidivism. We got programs for everything from drug rehab to computer tech. Our counselors are trained in psychology, sociology, and some can even run a yoga class. We'll give you leads on jobs, apartments and used cars. Hell, we'll teach you how to swim if it's something you need to survive. But it's all for nothing if you don't care, Gus. You have to give a damn. You do that and you might make it out here."

I nodded with as much energy as I thought would impress him. "No one wants it more than me," I said.

Someone knocked on his office door. He shouted from his chair, "Come in."

A woman walked in. She was about thirty with a slight stoop in her back and long dull brown hair that hung across her face. Bony angles jutted from her chin and elbows. Her clothes didn't fit right.

“Barbara. You still here?”

“I wasn’t sure we were finished. I’m gonna go now. I guess I’ll see you later, at the house?”

He stood up, wrapped his arms around her shoulders and walked her out of the office. I waited for a minute or two until he returned and shut the door.

“Sorry about that. My daughter, Barbara. She’s not feeling well.”

I nodded.

Dillings finished his pep talk and moved me on to the man who would be my official parole officer, another white guy I immediately nicknamed Dirty Harry. He was young, younger than I, but his squint was old and cold, without sympathy, not even a “let’s work together” cliché. All business.

“You check in every week. You got my card. Call if there are any issues.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“You’ll know when it happens. Don’t waste my time. That’s all I ask. I got too many files to worry about the screw-ups. If you make this work, we’ll have no problems.”

“It’s gonna work. No doubt about that.”

“Every guy who’s ever sat in that chair said the same thing. Know how many of them really made it?” He tapped his stack of papers on his desk like they were a deck of cards.

I took a wild guess. “Not many?”

“Right. Very few, in fact. To be honest, Corral, the odds are against you.”

“I been fighting the odds all my life.”

“Yeah? Where’d that get you?”

I had no answer.

“Just remember,” he said, “I got eyes on you and if you miss a beat, it’s over. I’ll turn up when you least expect it, so you don’t get second chances with me. You pay attention to the rules, you get a job, keep your nose clean, everything will be okay. First sign of you

out of step, you're violated, and back you go. Simple and easy, right?"

Whatever, boss.

"I got a job." I sounded boastful but that was all right.

He looked up from his inch-thick pile of forms. "You do? Already?"

"Yeah. My attorney, Luis M3n3tez. He hired me."

"To do what? It has to be a legit job, Corral."

I ignored his rude assumption about the arrangement Luis and I might have worked out.

"It's real. I'm going to be his investigator, process server, janitor, all-around go-to guy. He said he'd send over the papers you need for your records. And he also said you can come by and check us out whenever. We got nothing to hide."

He rocked back and forth in his office chair. "That's good, Corral. I like that. I'm actually happy to hear the news. I know this guy M3n3tez. I've worked with some of his other clients. That could be a good fit for you." He picked up his pen and chewed on it for a few seconds, like a man carrying a nicotine monkey. "On the other hand . . ."

"What?"

"On the other hand, I heard about some of M3n3tez's capers in the past. That guy was almost disbarred. He's been arrested. Nothing ever came out of his legal troubles, but you have to stay away from anything that's off-center. You understand?"

"What you have to understand is that I'm going to do all I can to get back on the right path. That's what you want, right? I ain't gonna do anything to screw that up. You don't have to worry about me."

"Good. I hope so. But they pay me to worry about you guys." Now I was one of the guys. "One other thing. You can't participate in his criminal cases. Might put you in contact with felons, ex-cons. That would not be good."

"Luis said we could work around that. He's done this before. He knows how it has to be."

“No problem then.”

We set a schedule for visits and reviews and a few other things that were required by the State of Colorado in return for me being back on the streets. Harry went through all the rules and regulations, again, and itemized each and every act of life I was prohibited from doing. He finally asked for my urine.

When I left Harry’s office I felt like I’d been back in prison for a few sweaty hours. I didn’t like that feeling.

But I didn’t feel like a criminal. I didn’t feel much else, to tell the truth. One day I was locked up, the next I wasn’t. Whatever happened to me the last few years was over. My prison adventure ended and that meant that all the alliances and conflicts and enemies and games that I’d created and played to survive were finished. Out of sight, out of mind. Now what?