



# THE BALLAD OF GATO GUERRERO

A LUIS  
MONTEZ  
MYSTERY

**MANUEL RAMOS**

"A powerful, distinctive series." —*Publishers Weekly*

### **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

“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*

“A very impressive debut.”

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

“Ramos is developing a powerful, distinctive series.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Ballad of Gato Guererro*

“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.”

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“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.”

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“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*

**THE BALLAD OF**  
**GATO GUERRERO**  
A LUIS MONTEZ MYSTERY



**MANUEL RAMOS**



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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*For Mom and Dad.*

Thank you, Mercedes.



*El día que yo me muera  
No voy a llevarme nada  
Hay que darle gusto al gusto  
La vida pronto se acaba  
Lo que pasó en este mundo  
Nomás el recuerdo queda  
Ya muerto voy a llevarme  
Nomás un puño de tierra.*

“Un Puño de Tierra”  
—Carlos Coral (D.A.R.)





After years of scraping by, I suddenly found myself to be an involved, culturally aware person—Mr. Cool and Clean—a man on the brink of business success, at least in terms of paying my bills. If it hadn't been for Felix Guerrero, I might have plodded quietly through my American dream. But Felix was a friend, and if friends don't occasionally shake things up—hey, what good are they? The price for such friendship probably is cheap in the long run. What's a little death in return for a minute or two of love?

Ah, Gato. You had a way, man. You had a way. . . .



# 1

I squinted at a stage of flashing lights: red, blue, yellow, green, red, blue, yellow, green. A pattern of clichéd southwestern icons framed the musicians. Garish howling coyotes, thunderbirds and desert lizards vibrated with each loud note. Rhythmic guitar riffs echoed through the park, a drumset a polka cadence and a skinny, bent-over old man, pumping and squeezing a beat-up accordion with every ounce of soul left in his shriveled body, sang about confronting the pain from the lost love of his beautiful brown lady by drinking all the tequila in south Texas.

Couples bobbed in a fast-moving counterclockwise circle. Dark-eyed women in jeans or flowery skirts swished their hips as their men twirled them in and out, forward and backward. The grace and affection of people releasing themselves to the music dizzied my brain and warmed my heart.

Teenagers, *viejitas*, lawyers, trash collectors, low-riders, ranchers, Chicanos, Pueblo Indians, whites and blacks—the last night of the festival had brought together every race and class. A syncopated sea of Stetsons, glistening boots and shiny jewelry moved with the music. Sweat mixed with beer and sloppy kisses on the dance floor. I could have reached out and touched the lust.

Those not dancing watched with expert eyes, nodding their heads at those who understood the need to be precise in their routines, praising the new steps of old friends, laughing at the strangers who had no idea what they were doing. They sat at picnic tables or on their own lawn chairs, consumed platefuls of spicy enchiladas, greasy fried potatoes and roasted corn with chile powder and compared this year's music with every other festival.

The accordionist smiled, mystified by the love all these lucky people had for the music he had learned from his father and grandfathers, music that had been played for decades, ignored except by the fans who gathered for wedding dances on Saturday nights, Sunday-afternoon *parrandas* at recreation centers and Knights of Columbus halls or the occasional *matanza*.

Felix and Elizabeth were in the middle of the crowd. They had sailed by a couple of times, two-stepping like pros, laughing and hugging each other, as lovers should. I searched for Felix's bright blue shirt with the purple, orange and brown embroidered Indian symbols across the back or for Elizabeth's billowy western skirt flaring around her red cowboy boots. Bumping into them on the dance floor seemed the only way for me to connect. For that, I needed a partner.

Ah, the women of New Mexico! In every size and color, I was surrounded by Chicana beauty—*flaquitas*, *gorditas*, *güeritas*, *prietitas*.

The music stopped to applause and whistles. A florid, almost hoarse announcer with shoulder-length hair and a red bandanna looped around his forehead rushed to the stage and eagerly shouted to the throng.

“¡Ay-ay-ay! ¡Qué bonita música! Another hand for the grand master—Epifiano Morales. He can still pump it out, eh? And we're only getting warmed up! Next is a real special

treat! Somebody none of you want to miss. The man we've been waiting for all night! All the way from Alice, Texas! Number one in *tejano* music today—Tony C.! Yes, Tony Candelaria . . . *¡y su conjunto!*”

A piercing female scream sliced through my eardrums. Groups of tittering girls flocked around the stage. Obviously, the past year had been good for Candelaria—big sales, awards, number-one songs and now the final act at the Española Music Festival. Tony Candelaria had arrived in the big time.

Ernesto López stood next to me, a beer can in his hand and a wide grin plastered across his dark, sunburned skin. We had met at Evangelo's in Santa Fe only a few hours before when I waited for a message from Felix. He had a friendly face and a dry sense of humor—a *manito* who fit in easily with the bar's tourists and townies. He had casually started a conversation about the music festival, Chicano art and culture. We dealt only with important matters. Just how naïve was the promoter who hired a Texas band for a New Mexican fiesta? It had to be a good sign that *la música* was heard on the FM stations, no? Was it true that serious artists preferred living in Española over Santa Fe?

My swallow of beer dried into coal dust when I saw the gun tucked away in a shoulder holster underneath Ernesto's trim western-cut leather jacket. The events of the past few weeks had made me jumpy and for an instant I thought about walking away and leaving Ernesto at the bar with his drink and weapon. Is that any way to live? A metal detector at Evangelo's swinging door would have uncovered at least another dozen guns toted by men and women in the New Mexican cantina. Was I supposed to insulate myself from all human connection? When Felix finally called and said to

meet him at the dance around ten, I had offered Ernesto a ride in my rented car.

The band's crew took twenty minutes to set up the equipment. Four burly, pony-tailed men, crammed into Tony Candelaria T-shirts, plugged in microphones, tested the sound level and laid out the instruments within easy reach of the musicians.

Ernesto and I were at one end of the stage, close to the action, hemmed in by the buzzing fans who fingered cameras and eight-by-tens of Tony C., impatiently whistling and hollering for their man. I had to shout to talk with López.

"This guy is hot, eh? These girls look like they're ready to faint."

Ernesto's grin grew even wider. Turquoise and silver glittered from his fingers and wrists and, I assumed, on the handle of his *cuete*.

"Tony C. has it made, man. Any *ruca* he wants, whenever he wants her. Making money like a hippie rock and roller. Texas ain't big enough for him anymore."

"How about Denver?"

"Sure, man. Sooner or later. With gambling in the mountains, there'll be more clubs, more bars. I myself left almost a thousand in *pinche* Central City just a few weeks ago. They can pay Tony C. out of that!"

He chugged his beer and looked around for the nearest MEN sign.

The crowd surged forward, stuffing us into the barricades surrounding the stage.

Tony C. nonchalantly strolled onto the stage and picked up his accordion. He was as pretty as his picture. Young and cocky, he sported a wide, floppy white sombrero with a two-inch handwoven band, tight, crisply creased jeans, an orange shirt and a yellow neck scarf.

The roadies finished their work and climbed from the stage to the barricade, where they swaggered, arms folded across their chests. I understood why they resembled Latino versions of overweight, professional wrestlers. I was trapped in a wall of flesh that wanted only to storm the stage and rip off Tony C.'s colorful and provocative clothes. I considered asking the guards whether I could stand behind them, for my own protection.

And then the music started.

Tony C. tore into a classic *tejano* tune, and I would have sworn he ripped apart his specially designed diatonic accordion. He whirled his machine around his head and across his back, sweat already lubricating his face. His instrument gleamed in the stage lights and reflected its own colors—red, white and green. Across the accordion's pleats, an angry eagle gripped a snake in its beak, expanding and shrinking with every move of Tony's hands. His bony fingers flew across the buttons in a sophisticated impersonation of Jimi Hendrix's techniques. Tony's voice carried across the park and into the homes of grandmothers who sang along as they watched flickering TV sets and tapped their slippers on linoleum floors.

If I could have moved, I would have grabbed the first agreeable woman and we would have danced and hollered and sung and acted like coyotes screaming at the white moon, and no one would have noticed us, because they all would have been doing the same. I decided that this festival was all right.

I turned to give Ernesto the good news, but he was gone.

Laughing, Elizabeth and Felix rolled into me.

"Louie, Louie. 'Bout time you made it, bud. Get ready to see the best Tony C. and his psychedelic squeeze box!"

My lanky friend held Elizabeth close to him, shielding her from the crush of the crowd. Her eyes gleamed. The flush



that played on her skin betrayed that she was winded from dancing, catching her in intimate reflection of her passion for Felix.

I wanted to ask about details that should have been important. For starters: What did they think they were doing? Had they been careful? Did Trini know where they were? But Felix made a move for the dance floor just as I started to speak, and I knew it wouldn't do any good to talk to them. Common sense and rationality had been dumped in Colorado. They pushed through the throng, looking for a way to the jammed but less crowded dance floor.

The blue-green-and-silver streak to the immediate right of Felix dredged up the coal dust from Evangelo's and clogged my throat. I wondered how Ernesto had slipped away and reappeared so quickly. The scene struck me as odd immediately, but I couldn't put my finger on what bothered me. Maybe it was the stage lights reflected on the barrel of the gun in Ernesto's hand. I shouted Felix's name but was drowned out by the music. Dozens of fans cut me off from my friends.

Ernesto pointed the gun at Felix's back. I grabbed handfuls of clothing and tried to move people by throwing them out of my way.

"Hey, man!"

"What the . . ."

"*¡Qué chinga, dude!*"

The people shoved back. A chubby, round-faced Chicano in a cowboy hat with a rhinestone-studded golden crucifix hanging from his neck threw a punch at me. I ducked and he missed my nose by a fraction of an inch, but in that instant I lost Felix and Elizabeth. I desperately eyed the mob scene when the shots rang out. There were screams and thuds and even the band missed a beat.