



BLUES FOR THE BUFFALO

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

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

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—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Last Client of Luis Montez*

“Ramos tells a gripping story with panache and humor, offering an inventive plot, a cast of appealingly oddball characters and a refreshing and likable hero.”

—*Booklist* on *The Last Client of Luis Montez*

“Ramos trades the intensity of Luis’ first two cases for nonstop, pleasantly incredible action.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Last Client of Luis Montez*

“A powerful, distinctive series.”

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

“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*

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—*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*

"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*

"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*

"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*

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MANUEL RAMOS



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FOR ZETA

c/s

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“What an ugly scar.”

I opened my eyes into the brilliant Mexican sun. The details of her face were masked in a numbing combination of light and more light created by the sun and the white beach that curved against the turquoise lagoon.

“It must have hurt.”

I shielded my eyes with the flat of my hand. Her skin recalled the *café con leche* I had nursed at breakfast. She wore a white, two-piece swimsuit that was less than a bikini and she looked hot and sweaty.

“It hurt like hell. I was in the hospital for weeks. I still limp.”

I raised a beer to my lips. My empty hand slipped from the handle of the cooler and grazed the hot sand and recoiled automatically. Her feet were naked, exposed to the sand.

“Is the bullet still in your knee?”

I did not ask how she knew it was a bullet wound. Maybe it was obvious.

“A fragment. But let’s not talk about my knee. My name’s Luis Montez.”

I extended my hand and she intertwined her fingers among mine.

“Rachel Espinoza. I’m Philip’s neighbor, when I can work it out. I saw you yesterday after the cab let you off. My place is up the road. Philip lets me use his beach.”

Small world.

My unresponsiveness did not deter her, although I could hear a reluctance in her words. Maybe she thought she had to be polite by carrying on a conversation. She continued in a voice that brought a sadness to the edge of the ocean.

“You must be his lawyer friend from Denver. He told me you were coming. Told me how you two met. When he was still a cop. He tried to arrest your girlfriend for murder. He likes to talk about that case. I think he fell for her, even though she shot somebody.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“That he got turned on by her, or that she shot somebody?”

“I don’t think it was murder. That was a long time ago. A real long time ago.”

“I guess you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Whatever. I’m trying to get some rest. I’ve had a bad year. I don’t mind the company, but I probably won’t say much. You know how it is.”

“Oh, yeah. I know.”

A sigh of relief slipped into the tropical air, and I was not sure if it had come from her or me.

She stretched belly down on a white blanket, turned her neck and looked up at me. The two-piece had disappeared into the blanket. The sun and heat played tricks with my eyes and I had a difficult time concentrating. She shimmered, disjointedly. Her bronzed legs, shoulders and arms leaped from the whiteness in a three-dimensional juggle of distorted flesh.

I remembered a time when I would have asked the woman if she wanted me to help with her suntan oil, or I would have

expected such a request simply because we were a man and a woman on a beach, in Mexico, with nothing better to do. That time floated out to sea on the tide that slapped the rim of the continent. I did not particularly regret its passing.

I had drifted into a steaming funk of idle humanity. I thought of nothing more than how I could get another beer without moving from the damp cushion of my beach chair.

I heard her say, "I'm a writer. Freelance, mostly. Articles for magazines, newspapers. What does it take to keep your man, and why would you want to? That kind of stuff."

I stirred and waved my hands at the blue sky, as though that would make me coherent.

I said, "You must be good if you can afford a place around here. Philip Coangelo had to invest his pension and make a killing on a string of juice bars all along the Baja coast for him to keep his condo."

"Oh, I do all right. And the house is shared by a bunch of us, so we split all the expense. I get away, so—I can think. I know it's trite, but I want to do something more serious than magazine fluff. You probably guessed that I'm trying to write a novel."

I hadn't guessed anything of the sort, but I did not let her know that. She must have sensed my hesitation and misread my lack of a response.

"Please, don't laugh. I've got several chapters finished."

She abruptly sat up and reached for her beach bag. The gaily-colored tote contained only one item, a stained and warped cardboard box that at one time had protected a ream of virgin typewriter paper. Rachel placed it in my hands and then dropped back on the blanket. I eased into my beach chair and turned my attention to the box.

"I've got a half-dozen copies of those, for people I meet who might give me a reaction. I like to know what people

think about my book. Maybe you can read it and provide some feedback?"

A hint of emotion crept into her voice. Here was something that interested her.

"I'm not much of a reader."

"That's not good, and you, an educated man. When you want, come by and we can talk about my book. I mean it about my writing."

My nap never would return, and no good reason to be antisocial came to me. I decided that I should talk. I gave her too much detail about my situation back home—the trouble and how I ended up with a bum knee.

I explained how the state supreme court had only recently lifted its sanctions and permitted me to start my practice again, and I had tried to resurrect my legal career. Time worked against me, so I did not have a chance to rearrange all the pieces of my life before I had to dive back into the grind of trying to make it again as a once-suspended, charged-with-multiple-felonies, formerly-on-the-run, fugitive Chicano lawyer. I described the banal details of how I set up shop in a room in my house and hung my old office sign across my porch. I made much about a handful of acquaintances in the Hispanic Bar Association who tried to soothe their prickly consciences for running out on me when I needed their support by sending me some opportune referrals. A few quick fender-bender settlements with insurance companies, a couple of retainers from criminal defendant clients who were intrigued by the possibility of having the infamous Luis Montez represent them and the always popular divorce clients, and I had almost regained my financial footing.

I told Rachel that for the span of several weeks I had been the focus of nasty newspaper headlines and TV investigative reporters. But I thought all that was behind me. I embellished

the scene when I walked into a Denver courtroom to enter my appearance in a messy domestic squabble and Judge Garcia publicly welcomed me back. I was persuaded that I had a new lease on the last two decades or so of my income-earning years.

But my wounded body hadn't cooperated with my attempts at resurrecting the scattered remains of my career, and I had to rest. When I had a dead week of time, I made arrangements to accept Philip's long-standing offer of a place to chill.

"And here I am, and now I've met you."

Except for a grunt that I think was her way of acknowledging our newly established relationship, she did not react to my lengthy meandering down memory lane. There had been a glimmer of excitement when she had spoken about her writing, but that had quickly passed. The melancholy returned and with it our silence. We ignored each other for several minutes, and eventually she said, "I'll probably drift off for a nap. I was up late last night."

I collected my few items of beach paraphernalia and walked back to Coangelo's place.

The ocean rolled against my legs and the sand gave way under my feet with each step. My knee worked extra hard. I had to stop several times because of the pain. I tried to think of other things.

I had arrived on the same night that Coangelo had left for a business meeting up north in the town of Tecate. Philip regularly conferred with his Mexican partners, the nominal owners of the juice bar chain. Among several words of caution, he had warned me about Rachel.

"There's a crazy group in the place next door. They call themselves artists, writers, you know. I think they're kooks. There's one, knowing you, you'll like her. Rachel. Cute, sexy. But out there, Louie. Be careful with her."

He was right. I liked her.



I calmed down over the next couple of days and almost put her out of my head. She did not make an appearance again, although I camped out on the beach each day for several hours and, in the evenings, wandered conspicuously close to her house. There wasn't much activity at her place that I could see, and her effect on me gradually wore off. I decided I did not need any kooks. I needed rest.

Coangelo had filled his space with plenty of amenities: sauna, climate-controlled shower, superb sound system, beautiful view of the beach. I took advantage of them all in my efforts to resuscitate my body and my spirit.

The day before I was scheduled to leave, I filled the whirlpool one last time. The hot, foaming water relaxed my knee. My mind downshifted into semi-drowsiness, my favorite state while in Mexico.

When I climbed out of the hot tub, I wrapped a beach towel around my waist. My stiff leg stretched along the cool tile of the floor as I sipped on a gin and tonic with a nice chunk of lime and examined Rachel's manuscript. I had set it aside and not bothered looking at it since she had given it to me. I undid the rubber band around the box and began to read. There were about two hundred typewritten pages and then several more of handwritten notes, drawings, figures and strange symbols I couldn't decipher.

She had written about the killing of an innocent man in a serious case of mistaken identity, but no one, including the man's wife, suspected murder. The youngest daughter, only ten, presumably knew something, but, at least in the few pages I read, she wasn't talking. I skipped over the novel and

tried to get a fix on the handwritten notes, but Rachel's flowery script made it difficult. I was losing interest when loud, insistent knocking saved me from an afternoon nap. A voice hollered through the walls of the condo.

“¡Señor Montez! ¡Señor Montez! ¡Abra la puerta! ¡Necesito hablar con usted inmediatamente! Open up!”

I limped to the door. My knee felt stiff and weak. There was something about the tone of the guy's voice that I did not like, something too familiar.

“For God's sake, quit your pounding! What is it?”

He was tall and angular, dressed in Mexican peon clothes—white cotton pajamas held around his body with rough strands of rope—and I wasn't sure if he was Mexican, a well-tanned North American or something else, maybe even Asian. His eyes had a squint, but I knew plenty of Chicanos who were more *chino*-looking than anything else, and the Mexican sun could wrinkle and squeeze the skin around a rhinoceros's eye, never mind the skin of a tourist from Detroit.

“Perdón. I am sorry to bother you. My name is Rudolfo Flores. I work for the people next door; I take care of their place. But they all seem to have left, without telling anyone they were leaving, without paying their bills, without paying me. And I had hoped that maybe you could take care of this.”

“What? I don't understand. They left?”

“They owe large amounts of money at the restaurant, the market, the bar. They are all gone. The women, Kodiack the writer, that other man, Gulf. And we thought, that is, because you are also North American, and you knew the girl, that is, I've been sent by the *alcalde* to see if you know anything about them, where they might have gone?”

I did not want to get involved in anything even slightly off center. I wasn't in the mood for any new adventures.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t actually know those people. I can’t do anything about them. I’m sorry. Tell the *alcalde* that I can’t do anything, that maybe when Mr. Coangelo returns, he might know something about them. But right now, I need to put some clothes on.”

I shut the door in his worried face.

The next day, I flew back to Denver, the box with the manuscript taking up space in my bag because I did not know what else to do with it. I thought I’d call Coangelo later and ask him about the girl. Maybe he knew an address. I did not see Flores again, and the *alcalde* never took the time to drop by and introduce himself. When I landed in Denver, Rachel and her disappearing act and writing career were not priorities.