



BROWN-ON-BROWN

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*

"A powerful, distinctive series."

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

"The evil and retribution are distributed with a hand so generous it smacks of second-novel blues, though Ramos miraculously ties up more loose ends than you'd ever have imagined."

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Ballad of Gato Guerrero*

"Ramos' finely crafted tales contribute a welcome Hispanic voice to the mystery genre."

—*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*

"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*

"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*

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*This is for Max Martinez, a writer and a pal.
Que descanse en paz.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, a reminder that this book is fiction. Its roots are in my imagination and nowhere else. And, often, the fruit of my imagination has nothing to do with the real world. For example, the legal proceedings that take place in this story, the extended water rights litigation, could not happen in the manner I have described. The case in my story is not based on any actual courtroom drama. I hope that does not distract the reader.

For those who might read too much into my words, I must say that I have nothing but respect and admiration for the lawyers, community groups, organizers, everyday people who become litigants and their supporters who take on lengthy court battles in the interest of justice, ignoring (and sometimes harming) their self-interests, often at their own expense, and, more often than not, without any recognition. Prime examples are the lawyers, legal workers, activists and the solid *gente* who have been involved in the *Lobato v. Taylor* case for decades. They are true heroes of the people.

My deep appreciation to the folks at the University of New Mexico Press who gave new life to Luis M3n3tez—they said yes when no was in the air for the first edition. Thank you, again, Mercedes Hern3n3dez for everything you have done to help me. Flo, without you this is not possible. Jaden Diego Ramos: you and this book almost shared the same year of birth. May you enjoy a long, fruitful and happy life.

And, finally, *gracias* to those of you who asked about Luis. Here he is, one more time.

“Sometimes I feel like a coiled spring with a dangerous flaw.”

Attributed to Ty Cobb

“La verdad padece pero no perece.”

Mexican proverb

PART ONE

The Old Man and the Wife

PROLOGUE

Article from *El Semanario*, “News of Colorado’s Latino Community”

POLICE SHOOTING RULED “JUSTIFIED” BY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

By George Tafoya, Guest Columnist

At last week’s press conference conducted on the steps of the City and County Building, Denver District Attorney Daniel Galena announced the findings of his investigation into the police shooting death of Alfred “Freddie” Canales. Galena said that after lengthy questioning of the police officers involved and other witnesses he had determined that officers Gary Brunnell and Lydia Socorro fired in self-defense. On the night of June 17th police officers responded to a call from Margaret Canales, mother of the victim, who called 911 because her son was drunk and violent and had threatened family members with a gun. According to Galena, when the officers arrived at the Canales residence, in the six hundred block of Fox Street, Canales refused to obey their orders to drop the weapon. Both officers fired when Canales raised the weapon in their direction and screamed, “This is it! Now or never!”

Several members of the Anti-Police Crimes Coalition, many carrying signs reading “Stop Police Murder!” and “Justice for Freddie!” attended the press conference. Robert Salazar, representing the Coalition and reading from a prepared statement, said that Freddie Canales had been “gunned down in cold blood” and that Margaret Canales’ version of what happened was “at complete odds” with the “white-washed cover-up” announced by the district attorney.

Alfred Canales, 25, recently had been released from prison where he served seven years of a fifteen-year sentence for attempted murder. Canales had been convicted of assaulting a man with a tire iron. At his trial, Canales’ attorney, Luis M3nchez, argued that Canales acted in self-defense. M3nchez did not return calls from this reporter.

ONE

MY CHIN SLAPPED against my chest and I awoke with a startled grunt. My eyes blinked open to the soft glare of carefully orchestrated lighting. I recognized the barely audible hum of people leafing through books, furiously scribbling case cites and judicial quotes on sheets of yellow legal pads or tapping the resilient letters of a laptop keyboard. I realized I had fallen asleep at a corner cubicle in the law library in the basement of the state Judicial Building.

I stretched my arms over my head and tried nonchalantly to survey my fellow library patrons to determine if anyone had noticed me snoozing or maybe had heard snores coming from my table. But I worried needlessly. I almost had the place to myself. Computer research had taken the lawyers out of the law library, except for me. I still did it the old-fashioned way.

Only a few very young lawyers with colorful ties or business-length skirts eyed me disdainfully, even wrinkled their faces. Apparently they *had* busted me indulging myself with a short respite.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

“Móntez? Is that you?”

Harry López grinned like Mona Lisa on meth. I reluctantly shook his extended hand and then rubbed my face to

get the blood pumping back into my brain. I had a kink in my neck. I must have been asleep for more than a few minutes with my head twisted in a weird angle.

“You were really out,” he said. “I could hear you from the other side of the room.”

“What are you doing here? I didn’t think you knew how to read.”

He frowned but his smile almost immediately came back. Harry did not let little things like insults get between him and the rest of the world. Harry had learned a long time ago that a good con man had to know how to get along with anybody for at least a few minutes, even someone who hated him, who wanted him hurt. Harry was a good con man.

He said, “Take it easy, greasy. I thought we were friends, brothers from the hood and all that.”

His smile got even bigger and brighter and I had to turn my face because Harry’s brilliant white teeth hurt my eyes.

“Harry, we were never friends and God forbid we’re related in any way. I’d have to shoot my father. Me lawyer, you client. Several times. That’s our relationship, Harry. Which reminds me, you owe me some money.”

His eyes opened as wide as they could without his blue contacts falling out and a red rash of embarrassment crept up his neck jowls and pointy ears.

“No way. Can’t be. I paid off your bill, I’m, uh, almost certain. I’ll look into it right away, Louie. Honest. I can’t believe I didn’t finish that up. What you think it is, now? Maybe a couple hundred?”

“Try a couple of thousand, Harry.”

The level of my voice had gradually risen. “Thousand” echoed through the large room and bounced back to me, along with a pair of “sh-h-h’s” from a worried-looking lawyer

and one homeless guy who vigorously gripped a Black's Law Dictionary with callused, short and dirty fingers.

Harry smiled again. There was nothing he could do about paying me a couple of thousand dollars so he had no need to worry about it. A hundred, *más o menos*, now that would have been a problem since we would have understood that such a sum was within Harry's ability. Then the question would have been how he could finagle himself out of doing anything about my bill right then, in the sheltered confines of the library. But for a thousand dollars or more we each had no hope, or expectancy, of ever seeing that much cross over from him to me and, thus, Harry's moral dilemma had been resolved.

I stretched again, shut the casebooks that had not kept me awake and said to Harry, "Follow me."

My work in the library was done for the day.

I thought Harry López was a smarmy lowlife with very little on the ball. My opinion appeared to be the minority one. Harry had survived solely on the strength of his ability to talk his way in or out of situations. Where I saw slick self-promotion, others saw straightforward ambition. Harry was good at double talk, triple talk, back talk, and for that I did not admire him. Yet others thought he was an articulate, loquacious, even earnest young man. By the time reality set in, Harry was usually long gone with more money in his pocket than when he had started out, and the mark was questioning whether what had just happened really had happened.

But I gave credit where credit was due. Harry's homies thought he was the luckiest man in the world, and I had to admit that the guy led a charmed life. During the numerous times I had represented Harry, he had been convicted only once for a misdemeanor harassment charge. Thirty days in the county jail, of which he ended up doing less than half. Not bad for a con that netted him more than ten grand. His rap

sheet was relatively short, unlike many of my clients, but of all the criminals and semi-criminals I mouthpieced for, Harry most likely was the real habitual, the genuine article when it came to the practice of blurring the line between a long shot and a downright scam, forget about the difference between right and wrong.

We rode the elevator up to the ground floor and silently walked out of the building under the gaze of the paunchy security guards.

When we were on the sidewalk next to Broadway, I turned to Harry and asked again.

“What are you doing here? What’s this about?”

My suit had immediately soaked up the street’s heat and I wiped sweat off my forehead.

“Móntez, you’re too much. Come on, dog! I could be here doing some work on one of my own cases, couldn’t I? It’s not unheard of, is it, that a guy checks out his legal situation on his own, rather than turning to one of you ambulance-chasers every time, is it? I could be here in a pro se capacity, so to speak.”

“Right, Harry. You’re working on one of your arrests. And I’m really Moctezuma’s long-lost son planning to take back Mexico.”

Harry López could get to me, really irritate me. I just didn’t like the man. I grabbed his wrist and twisted it. He jerked and tried to shake me free, but I had him good. I twisted some more, and he was about ready to drop to his knees when I let him go.

He shouted, “Jesus, Móntez! What’s with the rough stuff? You’re out of control. For a lawyer, you act worse than your clients. You used to be a mellow kind of guy. But lately, dog, it’s like you’ve really changed.”

He rotated his wrist and scowled at me.

“Damn. That hurt. Don’t do that again, Móntez. I mean it.”