

Dangerous Fiction

by [Brandon Crocker](#) (August 2025)



Everyone knows the saying “If it’s too good to be true, it usually is.” And most people know this is true—until something

too good to be true drops in their lap. Everything in life comes with strings attached. Or to put it another way, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." We all know that's true, too, until someone comes by offering us a free lunch.

My name is—or was, when this story began—Felix Ruiz. I was a bright, industrious young man, living in San Diego. My parents were both second-generation immigrants from Mexico, but I grew up a pretty typical, southern California American kid. I was an only child, but had plenty of friends, and my parents pushed me to get a good education which culminated in a diploma from San Diego State University.

My professional career, however, was far from spectacular. I worked a number of jobs, mostly in retail, but none lasted more than a few years. My real dream was to become a writer. When I was 29 I got my first (and only) short story published in a small, obscure on-line magazine, and I made a few dollars here and there as a free-lance journalist.

Despite my ambition, my would-be career as a writer refused to take off. A lot of that had to do with the fact that I wasn't a very good writer. I know that now, but didn't know it then. I had just turned 31. My father had died the year before, and I was making a living as an assistant manager at a retail store that was part of a national chain. I lived in a decent one bedroom apartment, which is the best a young person can really hope for in California. So I was doing ok, but not living my dream.

Then, out of the blue, I got an e-mail from an editor at the *San Diego Union* named Blake Winter asking me if I'd like to contribute to a big series of stories the newspaper was doing on Mexican drug gangs. *Why me?* The question floated ever so briefly in my mind. I had, after all, placed a couple small free-lance pieces in the *San Diego Union* over the past few years. Obviously, someone had recognized my talent. I responded immediately that I was on board.

A few days later I received a small package in the mail that included a letter from Mr. Winter on *Union* letterhead telling me to travel to the town of Ortiz in Sonora, Mexico, about 250 miles south of Tucson, Arizona. I was to check in at a hotel called the Veracruz, and on March 31st, I was to leave a message at the front desk for "Chupacabra" letting him know I was there and ready to talk. Chupacabra is the name of a mythical beast that looks like a hairless mad dog that kills goats and cattle and drinks their blood. So it sounded like an appropriate *nom de guerre* for a Mexican drug lord. Also in the package was \$600 cash to cover my travel expenses. I thought the cash a little unusual, but in the letter Mr. Winter explained that's how the *Union* handled travel expenses to Mexico.

I had never been to Ortiz, but I had travelled in Mexico, mostly in Baja California, where my mother still has relatives, and I speak Spanish fluently (or nearly so) so I had no apprehensions about the trip, other than the fear that I might screw up the assignment. I had, after all, never interviewed a drug lord before.

I arrived in Ortiz just before dark on March 30th, having spent the previous night in Tucson. Ortiz is a small, non-descript town whose visitors are typically only people passing through on their way to the much larger and more picturesque city of Guaymas, a few miles away, on the Gulf of California which is a popular spot for snorkeling and sports fishing. I had a reservation at the Hotel Veracruz, but I didn't need one.

The Hotel Veracruz had seen better days. I'd guess it had been built in the 1940s. It was a two-story adobe structure painted the color of sand. It may have been a slightly darker color previously as its last paint job had been far from recent and the sun and weather had taken a toll. The hotel was offset from the main street only by a two-foot wide concrete sidewalk and another couple of feet of sparse landscaping consisting

mostly of small succulents. I opened the plain wood front door and entered a small lobby. My shoes clacking on the orange tile floor was the only sound in the place as I walked up to an empty reception desk. After waiting a minute or so, I passed the unmanned desk and looked out from the lobby through a window in a wooden door that entered onto a not-unpleasant looking little courtyard in the middle of which was a non-functioning fountain.

"May I help you, Señor?"

I turned around and looked into the face of a thin young man, perhaps 20 years old. Despite my Mexican heritage, I must have had the look of an American as he addressed me in English.

"Si," I replied, showing off my bilingualism, before reverting to English. "I'm Felix Ruiz. I have a reservation."

The young man walked behind the reception desk and reviewed the ledger.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Ruiz. For *two* nights?" he said with a bit of surprise.

"Yes, that's me."

The young man proceeded to check me in and directed me to a small but comfortable room on the second floor. That evening I enjoyed what there was of the local scenery and had a decent meal at what appeared to be the most popular restaurant in the neighborhood, before heading back to my home at the Hotel Veracruz.

Ortiz, Mexico on the morning of March 31st was very pleasant. I rose about 7:30 and peaked out my window overlooking the courtyard. It was a clear, cool morning and all was quiet except for the chirping of a few birds. Half an hour later, I descended the stairs to the lobby where I discovered that the young man of the previous day had been replaced by an old man,

probably in his sixties, with sparse white hair, wrinkled, leathery skin, and brown teeth. I strode up to the desk and informed him of my mission.

"Buenos Dias. I'm Felix Ruiz in room 24. I was told to leave a message for Chupacabra that I have arrived and am ready to meet with him."

"Chupacabra?" replied the old man, with a tinge of disbelief in his voice.

"Yes, Chupacabra—though I doubt that's his real name."

The old man looked at me askance in a way that eroded some of my confidence. I am not a large man, myself, coming in at only about five foot seven inches tall and 140 pounds, but I put on the best show I could of being a big deal. I supposed it was not every day that someone asked about Chupacabra.

"Si, Señor," the old man said slowly. "I will ask for him."

"Gracias. In the meantime, I'll be across the street getting a little breakfast."

The huevos rancheros I had were not bad. I lingered a long time over my not-so-good coffee, but Chupacabra did not come by, so I returned to the Veracruz. The front desk was again deserted. I went up to my room and having found neither a note, nor Mr. Chupacabra, I decided to make use of the pleasant courtyard. I sat on a bench, partly shielded from the sun by a small scraggly tree, and started into a Doc Savage novel I had brought along. I thought *The Man of Bronze* would get me in the proper mindset.

An hour or so passed by and after reading a scintillating passage in which Doc Savage makes a miraculous escape from the clutches of the evil villain, I happened to look up, and thought I saw a face flit by the window in the door leading back into the lobby. So I put down Doc Savage and strolled

back in to see if there was any message from Chupacabra. But, again, the front desk was empty and there wasn't a soul in the lobby.

It wasn't until that evening on my way out for dinner that I ran across another human being in the hotel. It was the young man from the previous evening. I enquired if I had had any messages, and he just replied with a polite "No, Señor."

I got up at dawn the next day on the chance that maybe Chupacabra was an early morning type of guy. I hung about in the lobby for awhile until the queer looks from the old man who occasionally walked through making a perfunctory check that nothing was disturbing the silence, finally drove me across the street to the same café at which I breakfasted the previous day. I decided to try the chorizo and eggs, and regretted it. Slightly nauseated, I returned to my room and waited around until my noon checkout time. But Chupacabra never made an appearance.

As I left the hotel with my bag and made my way to my car located in an adjacent small parking lot, I kept my eye out hoping that a speeding black SUV would sweep by, disgorge some burley masked man who would then blindfold me, shove me in the black SUV and whisk me off to Chupacabra's secret lair for our interview. But that didn't happen. My journey home was sadly uneventful.

I wasn't sure how Mr. Winter would take the news, but I figured I should give him a call and let him know that Chupacabra was a no-show. So when I arrived in Tucson, as soon as I checked in to the Motel 6, I called up the *San Diego Union* offices. After several minutes on hold I was told that there was no one by the name of Blake Winters working there.

That was weird. Could someone have just been playing a practical joke? No one I knew would blow \$600 on a practical

joke, so I highly doubted that. It was a mystery. But I decided not to think much more about it. That was a mistake. When something like that happens to you, you should think about it, a lot. If I had, I might not have fallen into the next trap.

About three weeks after returning from Mexico, I was leaving work and heading to my car in the mall parking lot when I was approached by a tall, slightly rotund man in his 60s, wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses.

"Excuse me, but are you Felix Ruiz?"

I looked him over carefully before responding, "Yes."

"The Felix Ruiz who wrote *The Mystery of Black Gulch* for *Detective Magazine* a couple years ago?"

Could this really be? A fan? "Yes," I said, suddenly warming to this rather homely looking gentleman. "That's me."

"Well, Felix—can I call you Felix?"

"Sure—, I didn't catch your name? "

"Edgar. Edgar Poe. Well, Felix, I was hoping you could help me out with a novel I've written."

"Really?"

"Yes. You see, I've written this, and it's a little personal at times, and I really don't like publicity and fame. So, I was wondering, if I gave it to you, would you be willing to take it to a publisher to be published under your name? I've already passed it to an agent—anonymously—and he says he can get it published. Then we can split the proceeds, fifty-fifty."

There it was, too good to be true. A novel written, agent with a publisher at the ready, and all I had to do was agree to put

my name on it.

"Can I read it first?"

"Of course," said Mr. Poe handing me a large manila envelope. "Here's a hard copy and a thumb drive."

It wasn't a long novel, barely 50,000 words, and I read it all that night. I thought it was great. A really ripping tale of action and adventure and an involved and detailed plot of drug smuggling, corrupt officials, double crosses, and murder. I called Poe back the next morning.

To my surprise, the agent he had put me in contact with responded back in just a week, telling me he had a contract ready for signature with a major independent publisher. And just a few weeks after that, the editor at the publishing house sent me the final proof to review, with barely any changes to the original manuscript. I had to hand it to Mr. Poe. He was an exceptional writer.

Then, a mere ten weeks after bumping in to Mr. Poe, out came the book *Sonoran Blood* by Felix Ruiz! I had always thought these things took a lot longer. It was a slick looking hard-cover and the publisher had a short, but well-funded, initial publicity burst and before you knew it, *Sonoran Blood* had reached number nine on the *New York Times'* best sellers list!

At first, like Mr. Poe, I was a little leery of all the attention—especially given that I actually didn't write the damn thing! But I had to play along. I attended book signings in bookstores and even a couple book fairs. And before too long, I got my first royalty check. It was for more than \$50,000! I called Mr. Poe to see how he wanted me to arrange getting him his 50%, but when I called his number, a recording said it was no longer in service. I just presumed he'd changed numbers and that he would get a hold of me soon.

That winter, on the last day of January, I attended another

book fair in Los Angeles. The organizers had roped me in to participating in a question and answer panel with some other authors. It was a little intimidating since I was, after all, a fraud.

A middle-aged woman who was one of the event organizers introduced me and my two fellow victims whose books were not *New York Times* bestsellers, but, as far as I know, they actually wrote. We were on a small stage in a rather cramped room. The 50 or so seats were occupied for the most part. I was hoping the crowd would not notice my existence, but the first question was directed to me.

"Mr. Ruiz," asked one young lady "what is your method of writing? How do you work out such complex stories?"

I should have been prepared for a question like that but I wasn't. I had concentrated more on making sure I knew all the details of the story that I had supposedly written.

"Well, er, sometimes you just think of things and, you know, an idea pops into your head, and then you, well, write it all down."

Some of the other panelists got similar questions and, I have to admit, they gave somewhat better answers. Fortunately, my abysmal performance on the first question appeared to take me off the audience's radar, and the only other question I got was whether I identified with any of my characters, to which I could honestly and unequivocally say "no."

Having finished that ordeal, I headed off the stage through the disbursing crowd. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw some people following me. *Groupies*? The thought pleased me. But when I reached my little table where I was signing books, I was rather disappointed to find only a short line, and only a few more people came by after that. It was a waste of time. Spent two hours there and maybe only sold a dozen books. Perhaps my 15 minutes of fame was coming to an end.

Heading to my car in the parking lot, I again got the feeling that I was being followed. I turned around and saw two burly Hispanic men walking with purpose directly towards me. They didn't look like groupies. So I walked with extra speed, only to be stopped in my tracks by two more burley Hispanic men who quickly, and a little roughly, threw me into the back of a black SUV. Someone covered my eyes with a blindfold.

"We're going to take you to see your friend, Chupacabra. He's your biggest fan," the driver informed me.

Being wedged between two rather nasty looking brutes on the way to meet someone named Chupacabra who, no doubt, had somehow earned that name, does not make for a comfortable ride. I lost track of time and, since I was blindfolded, direction. But after at least a couple hours the SUV came to a stop. My traveling companions exited the vehicle and I heard mumbled voices speaking Spanish. Then a pair of large hands grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the SUV. Another set of hands then grabbed my other arm and I was marched into some building and down a single flight of stairs and plopped onto a stiff wooden chair. Someone bound my hands behind my back and to the chair and my ankles were also bound to the legs of the chair. This was all done in complete silence. I was left in that condition, still blindfolded, for what seemed like yet another hour. They obviously wanted the terror to seep in to my mind. And it was working.

Finally, I heard the door open and two pairs of feet coming down the stairs. I could tell that two men were standing in front of me, but again, all was silent for at least a minute. Then, with a quick and violent tug, one of them ripped the blindfold from my face.

The room was entirely vacant except for me, the chair, the two men, a flight of wooden stairs and a light bulb shining

directly above my head. There were no windows. I assumed I was in a basement.

One of the men was young and muscular with a wide face and dark short hair. The other man was older, perhaps 40, slightly taller and more slender and with a long scar along his left cheek. *This is too much of a caricature.* But I was wrong in assuming that scar face was Chupacabra. Chupacabra was, in fact, the younger and, I must say, dumber looking fellow.

"So, Mr. Ruiz. We finally meet!"

I was at a loss for words, so I did not reply.

"I understand you came to see me about a year ago and, unfortunately, I did not have the time to chat with you. Now I wish I had. It might have saved us both a lot of trouble."

"Am I in Mexico?" I finally managed.

"No, you are not in Mexico. You do not need to be in Mexico to be in the control of Chupacabra."

"Are you MS-13?"

"MS-13? What do you know of MS-13?"

"Aren't they a drug gang?"

Chupacabra's companion laughed.

"MS-13 is a drug gang, among other things. Very active around these parts. They are competitors of mine. But they are kind-hearted folks. Compared to me, they are very nice."

"Really, Señor Chupacabra," I stammered, "I really don't know what this is all about."

"No? You wrote about it very eloquently in your book. Detailing my smuggling operations, exposing my operatives—ever so slightly veiled, of course, with stupid fake names."

"The book? I really didn't write it!"

"I wouldn't admit to writing it, either. Complete trash. No plot, no character development. But I really don't care about who actually wrote it, I want to find out who supplied you with your information. You obviously know someone in my organization. Someone who is working against me and has cost me much through all these disclosures. And believe me, I will find this out from you. You came to me once. Was it to sell this information to me? Now you will sell it cheap!"

"I swear, I don't know anything!"

"How should we go about this, Hector? Maybe castration first? Then hot poker in the eyes? Chop off his fingers? Then skin him alive?"

A broad grin grew over Hector's scarred face.

"Then, of course, we'll sew your face onto a soccer ball to give to underprivileged children."

"But really, I don't know anything about this! I was set up!"

"Really? Who set you up, Mr. Ruiz?"

"I don't know! Edgar Poe!"

"Edgar Poe? Edgar *Allan* Poe?"

Suddenly, I realized what a complete idiot I was.

"I don't know his middle name ... he's not obviously *the* Edgar Allan Poe!"

"No, obviously not. He's dead. As you soon will be. I am leaving you a choice though, Mr. Ruiz. You can tell me what I need to know, and we will kill you quickly, or you don't tell me and we have lots of fun with you until you are dead."

"But I told you, I don't know anything!"

“Well, if that is really true, Mr. Ruiz, it is very bad news for you, but good news for the underprivileged children. The last soccer ball we gave them is pretty much worn out.”

Chupacabra followed up this speech with a high-pitched squeaky laugh. If I had been in a better frame of mind, it would have made me laugh back at him. Chupacabra’s moment of mirth was short-lived and he turned to Hector with a serious look.

“Shall we get started?”

Hector climbed up the stairs knocking twice on the door which someone opened from the other side. Two men then followed Hector back down the stairs. One was carrying a medium sized metal suitcase; the other held only a machine gun. The man with the suitcase approached and opened up the case on the floor in front of me, exposing a selection of knives.

“Again, Mr. Ruiz,” said Chupacabra, “do you have anything to tell me before we start?”

Just as I was about to plead my innocence one final time, there was a loud bang, and the light above my head went out. The room was now pitch black.

“What was that?” yelled Chupacabra, in Spanish. “You stay here!”

I heard feet clambering up the stairs and the door open and shut. Then there were more explosions followed by gunfire and shouts. I tried to wriggle from the chair but only succeeded in toppling over. The door opened once again and a narrow beam of red light locked on to Hector followed by the sound of a shot. Bullets from a machine gun sprayed above me, but fell silent as more shots came from the stairs.

The next thing I knew I was cut from the chair and I was again being pulled along rather roughly by two men but this time up the stairs, out of the dark house and into another black SUV

which soon sped me away from the gunfire and explosions.

Life can be confusing sometimes. This was one of those times. I wasn't sure who these people were, but they had rescued me from a rather uncomfortable situation, so I was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. These were probably good guys. They were wearing tactical gear which made them appear to be law enforcement, but I didn't see any badges or anything that identified who they were. I had lots of questions but thought it best just to stay quiet for awhile and hope that everything would reveal itself in time. My new friends did not seem very talkative either. One of them said, "You okay?" and I replied "Yes," and that seemed to satisfy everyone.

As we drove, I looked out at all the ordinary people going about their ordinary lives, somehow surprised that they didn't realize what was going on. Funny how we think things like that. My ordinary life now seemed worlds away. I was a relatively famous author now, but the only doors that was going to open for me in the future was to the morgue. As the young people say today, I wasn't living my best life. And perhaps very soon I wouldn't be living any life.

I don't know what the men in the SUV with me were thinking about. No doubt they had lives beyond the tactical gear and guns. It must be quite an adjustment to go home in the evening. Put away the guns and the body armor, get into the Honda Accord and drive home and hug the wife and kids and pat the family dog.

"How was your day today, honey?"

"Oh, the usual. Gun fight with a drug gang. Blew a few guys away. Saved some hapless bozo who had gotten himself in trouble. Fortunately the bad guys didn't kill me in the process. What's for dinner?"

Maybe I exaggerate. This probably wasn't a usual day for these guys. But it seemed to me they were pretty good at it and must have done something like this a few times before.

After about twenty minutes of mostly silent driving, the guys up front starting having a conversation with someone on the radio. They were arranging to deliver me somewhere. Finally, I worked up the courage to speak up.

"Who are you guys?"

"FBI. Big question seems to be, who the hell are you!"

At that moment, I wasn't quite sure myself.

We pulled around to the back of a police station and I was quickly removed from the SUV and rushed in through the back door like some big celebrity avoiding the paparazzi. I was in Santa Ana, and now the guest of the Santa Ana police.

A plain-clothed detective and two uniformed officers brought me through the station, past desks and other officers and finally into an empty office where I was instructed to take a seat on a comfortable brown leather couch. The office apparently belonged to the detective as he leaned his buttocks on the edge of the desk as he stared at me. One of the FBI agents entered as the two uniformed police exited the office, closing the door behind them.

"You've had quite a day, Mr. Ruiz," said the detective. I thought it a rather stupid comment. But I wasn't in a very good mood.

"This is Detective Chu of the Santa Ana PD," the FBI officer informed me. "We'll be making use of his facilities for a little while until we find a better place for you."

"Can anyone tell me what is going on?"

"We were actually hoping you might be able to shed some light

on that for us. But we'll wait for Special Agent Evans to arrive before we start. In the meantime, would you like something to drink?"

"Yes. Jack Daniels on the rocks."

Chu let out a forced chuckle. "Water or a soft drink?"

"Water would be fine. And can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure."

A couple officers escorted me to the bathroom and when I got back to Chu's office I found a glass of water and Special Agent Evans waiting for me. I sat back down and took a long drink of water.

Evans was seated behind Chu's desk. What I could see of him he looked like part of a Marine Corps recruiting poster. Broad shoulders, square head, short brown hair, and brown eyes that were fixed on mine. It wasn't until he stood up that I realized that he wasn't much taller than I was. He motioned for Chu to take off, and when Chu closed the door behind him, the other FBI agent took a seat next to me.

"So, Mr. Ruiz," started Evans, taking a quick look down on some notes before reaffixing on me. "You wrote this book that, it seems, included a lot of accurate and specific details about the operations of Chupacabra in the Arizona and southern California area that the DEA was then able to use to arrest a dozen or so of Chupacabra's men, shut down two tunnels, and seize three warehouses with more the \$10 million worth of cocaine, fentanyl, and a few other illegal substances, not to mention a stash of AK-47s. Chupacabra is understandably upset with you and wants you, and whoever may be supplying you your information, dead. That's what we seem to have. Anything you can add to that?"

"Look, I really don't know what is going on. All I know is

that someone, for some reason, has set me up.”

I then told Evans about all the communications I had with Blake Winter, the trip to Ortiz, Mexico, and then the meeting with Edgar Poe. I think he believed me. How could I make this up?

“When, exactly, was the meeting with Poe in the parking lot?” asked the agent sitting next to me.

“It was March 30th of last year. About 6 pm.”

“Might be video from parking lot cameras?”

“Not likely,” replied Evans. “Not after this long. The quality would probably be crap, anyway. But make an inquiry with the management company, just in case.” He returned his gaze to me. “Unfortunately, your description only narrows our list of suspects down to about 10 million people.”

Evans flipped through his notes again, and I took the opportunity to ask something that was on my mind.

“So what happened back there? How did you know how to find me?”

“Lucky for you, the DEA had passed information to us a few months ago that Chupacabra’s gang was using the house. So we’ve had it under surveillance. We’ve also been keeping tabs on you since it came out that you were a font of information on Chupacabra.”

“And what happened to Chupacabra? Is he dead, or in custody?”

Evans took a few seconds to respond. And when he did, it was not welcome news.

“We killed or captured a number of Chupacabra’s men, but not Chupacabra. He seems to have escaped. Do you have any family around?”

"Just my mom. In San Diego."

"She live alone?"

"Yes."

"We'll need that address. Contact SDPD," Evans instructed the other agent. "Make sure they have an officer there ASAP and keep the residence under surveillance. Just a precaution, Mr. Ruiz, but Chupacabra may attempt to kidnap your mom as a way to get to you."

I hadn't thought of that. Things were just getting worse.

"As for you, Mr. Ruiz, we'll keep you here for tonight. You should be very safe here. But we'll find another location for you shortly. I'm sure we might have more questions for you later."

Detective Chu's couch made a decent enough bed, and the Santa Ana PD was even able to provide me with a blanket. I did not sleep very soundly, however. My dreams all featured Chupacabra, Hector, and other unpleasant visions, which caused me to wake several times with my heart racing. When I opened my eyes in the morning, I was a bit startled to see a new face in front of me.

Detective Chu wasn't there, but this new person, a young dark-haired man in civilian clothes who identified himself as "Johnson" from the DEA started peppering me with questions.

"Wait," I objected, putting up my hand. "Can I get some coffee?"

"Hold on."

Johnson left the office and returned a few minutes later and handed me a mug of coffee and a Hostess Donette. After taking

one sip, Johnson resumed his questioning. He wanted to know everything about what Chupacabra had asked me and what I had told him. I waited until I finished the Donette before I started in on my memoir, but before I got very far, Detective Chu came in, and he didn't look happy.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Johnson, DEA." Johnson held out some ID to Chu.

"I thought this was an FBI case."

"We're involved too."

"Nobody told me that."

Evans then made his appearance.

"Who the hell is this?"

"Johnson, DEA. Tim Harris sent me over."

"I don't care. This isn't your case. Tell Harris I'll inform him of anything that I think is important for him to know. And I'd appreciate it if does the same for me. But this is my case."

Johnson stood, unmoved.

"Go!"

Johnson reluctantly left.

Evans then directed his anger at Chu. "Can anyone just walk in here?"

Chu proceeded to make apologies and shift blame to the uniforms outside, and I was thinking it funny that Chu was getting chewed out, but this was all giving me a headache. Finally, Chu left to exercise his wrath on others, and Evans reclaimed the chair behind Chu's desk.

"Sorry about that. We have our turf wars, too. Anyway, we've got a new place for you. A real nice safe house in San Diego. We're taking your mom there, too, again, just as a precaution."

Another long ride in another black SUV awaited me. I was beginning to feel important, but, of course, not in a good way. The trip was long and my butt was getting tired, but I avoided asking "Are we there, yet?" I was also getting hungry. The coffee and Donette had not made for the most satisfying of breakfasts.

"Can you stop for lunch?" I enquired as we passed a fast food place in a dingy looking south San Diego neighborhood.

"No. Hang on, we're almost there."

And that was true. Five minutes later we stopped at a narrow driveway leading up a hill from the main road. The driver called up on a radio, "We've arrived. All clear?" Ten seconds later, a response came back, "All clear." Up the drive we proceeded. It was one-way most of the time, with a few wider spots, bordered by overgrown trees and bushes. After about a quarter of a mile we reached the top of the hill and a large oval parking area in front of an old Italianate mansion. It looked like something out of *The Godfather*.

We disembarked from the SUV and ascended about a dozen wide concrete stairs which narrowed as they approached a glass and wrought iron front door, where another agent was waiting for us and ushered us into an impressive entryway of graceful arched travertine walls.

"Welcome to your new temporary home," said Evans. "Like it?"

"Wow," was all I could manage.

"A real nice place, built in the 1930's when everything else around here was farmland. Unfortunately for the owners, the

neighborhood that grew up around it wasn't the best. We were able to pick it up for a song a couple years ago."

We walked through to a sitting room with a large glass window that overlooked the front of the house and all the way down to the navy yard on San Diego Bay.

"And it comes with a pretty nice view."

"So I see. But isn't this rather conspicuous for a safe house?"

"Not really. We're pretty remote up here. You saw the long drive. That's really the only way up here. And then down the hill on that side is Navy housing, so we've got a good read on who's over there, and they have their own security. And next to us on that side is just one old house and we've fully vetted the residents. And here, we have a large gardening staff fully equipped and trained in the use of the best in firearms."

"That's comforting."

"Come with me and I'll take you to the butler's pantry. We've got some sandwiches for you and your mom. I understand she's already here."

The reunion with my mom was happy but also uncomfortable. The police hadn't told her a whole lot and she, of course, was pretty freaked out. I filled her in on all the details, and told her that I hadn't done anything illegal and it was all just part of some weird game in which I got unwittingly snared. I'm not sure I entirely convinced her that I was just an innocent victim, and, in fact, I didn't convince myself. I didn't live on the same moral plane as Chupacabra, but I realized that my problems all stemmed from my willingness to cut ethical corners in my pursuit of fame and fortune.

Life in the mansion was great, if only this was really my life. I had the run of grand rooms (if less than grandly furnished—the government did, it seems, have a budget), and my material needs (and that of my mom) were all provided for. But none of this was real. It wasn't some lifestyle I had earned and now could enjoy at leisure. It was a compound which was my prison. A very nice prison, but a prison nonetheless. I could not leave, I could not communicate with anyone on the outside, and I could not work. The mansion did have a sparse library and cable television, but prisons have those, too.

Every so often, Special Agent Evans would drop in, but never had any real news to report (or news that he wanted to report). I was just told that a new identity was in the works for me and that I'd soon have a life back (if not my old life back) through the Witness Protection Program. And after about a week, that day came. Evans came around after dinner and told me to be ready to move out early the next morning. Mom would stay at the mansion for another day or so, and then be returned to her home.

I rose early the next day, had a light breakfast and gave mom a final hug. Evans told us there would be a way to keep in touch, but for now he was silent on how that would work. He then escorted me to the grand foyer, opened the heavy wrought iron and glass door, wished me luck and shook my hand. Another agent walked by my side down the stairs to the oval drive where yet another black SUV awaited. It was just a little after sunrise and there was a chill in the air. The morning was still gray and mostly overcast, with just a streak of pale orange light illuminating the clouds above the old mansion. So *this will be the first day of my new life.*

Two agents occupied the front seats and I had the back to myself as we drove down the hill and then onto the main road. There was not much traffic, as it was still early. I noticed another SUV pass us, going faster than the speed limit. I was wondering if a cop would catch him when suddenly he swerved in

front of us and came to an abrupt stop.

"What the..." one the agents began to exclaim, as two men in hoods jumped out of the back of the SUV with AK-47s and ran up to the driver's and passenger sides of our vehicle, and motioned rather insistently for the FBI agents to exit. A white van pulled quickly up behind us and two similarly armed men were already at the back doors, knocking on the windows.

"We'd better cooperate," said my driver. "We're outgunned."

The FBI agents were swiftly led away into the SUV in front of us while I was taken to the white van and loaded into the back. There were padded benches along both sides and the van. Another man was in the far corner as I got in, followed by the two gunmen. Then the van started off with a quick jerk. All I could think was, *this cannot be happening!* And that's when the man in the corner of the van leaned forward towards me.

"Welcome, Mr. Ruiz."

After closer inspection, I was shocked to realize I knew this man.

"Edgar Poe!"

"Yes," he chuckled, "I thought I might have been too cute with that, but I couldn't resist. I was always a big Edgar Allan Poe fan. But my real name is Tim Harris, head of the Southern California DEA Field Office. "

"What does this all mean?"

"It means you are not going into Witness Protection. You're going to be delivered to MS-13, who will make sure you do disappear, permanently. I always thought that it would be Chupacabra who'd take you out, but it now seems that MS-13 sees you as a loose end and they'd rather not leave it up to Chupacabra."

"This was all quite fun," continued Harris. "You see, I was once an aspiring writer, too. But I never imagined that bilge I wrote would be a best seller. It's amazing what crap gets published and sells these days. Of course, calling in a big favor with a compromised publisher helped a lot. The idea was just to get enough attention that it wouldn't seem odd that I would read the thing and brilliantly recognize it as a true description of Chupacabra's operations, and that Chupacabra would get word of it and put him off the scent of our real source. He would think DEA got their information from you. But really we (or rather, I) got it from one of Chupacabra's most trusted men, who is really a member of MS-13. Then we at DEA help weaken Chupacabra before MS-13 goes in for the kill, and takes over Chupacabra's territory, now headed by our useful mole. I think you met him, by the way. He goes by Hector."

"Hector? But he's dead! The FBI killed him when they rescued me."

"No, they shot Hector, but fortunately in the chest and not the head. Hector always wears Kevlar."

"So you are MS-13?"

"No, just a subcontractor. I help them get away with things here and there, and I've helped them eliminate some of their rivals—like Chupacabra. I'll be retiring soon. My government pension won't be bad, but it's nothing compared to my MS-13 provided nest egg."

"You're a traitor."

"Traitor? Traitor to what? No, I wouldn't say that. You know the Iron Law of Bureaucracy, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"Well, whatever purpose a bureaucracy is set up for, eventually it just serves the purpose of its own well-being."

In this case, it's serving the well-being of Tim Harris. And Mrs. Harris, too, of course. She's not in on all the details, but she knows not to ask too many questions."

Harris was enjoying his speech. I guess it made him feel good talking about how smart he was, and trying to justify his actions to me and to himself.

"You disapprove? Well, I can tell you, the only morality that counts is what benefits us—or in this case, me. Just look at politics these days. Half of what goes on is one group trying to get things at the expense of some other group. They don't call that immoral. They pretend it's something high-minded. If anything, I'm just more honest about who I am and what I want."

"Honest? Who are you kidding?"

"Oh, don't pretend you're in any position to judge me. Look at you. You were willing to take credit for a novel you didn't write!"

"I can admit I was wrong, and I didn't think I was hurting anyone. You just manipulated me."

"Of course I manipulated you! But don't feel too bad. Most people are easily manipulated. You just need to know what motivates them. Greed, sex, ego. Dangle out what people want and you can get them to do—even believe—most anything."

"I don't believe that."

"No? Well you can go on not believing that while my friends at MS-13 chop you up into little pieces and throw you down a well, or whatever they have planned for you. And I'll go along believing it while I live, eating lobster and drinking champagne, wintering in the Bahamas and spending the summers in Switzerland."

The van had come to a stop. I thought it was just a traffic

light, and perhaps Harris thought that, too. But it had been too long for that and Harris was looking annoyed.

"What are we stopped for!" he called up to a speaker above him. "Is there any problem?"

"No problem," a voice answered back.

"Ok, well let's get going!"

Suddenly, the back doors to the van swung open. It was Special Agent Evans. The two armed men in the back with me leveled their weapons not on Evans but on Harris.

"Smile, Agent Harris. You're on Candid Camera."

Obviously, some things had taken place behind the scenes unbeknownst to me. The FBI had caught on to Harris, Special Agent Evans later explained, after they picked up Hector at the house where they had rescued me. Hector had not been killed, but he was captured, and after some interrogation, decided it was a good idea to cooperate with the FBI. He was the MS-13 contact in Chupacabra's organization that reported to Harris, but he didn't know Harris' actual identity. He only had a code name: "The Raven." That tipped off Evans that he was also my "Edgar Poe" and he suspected he was also Tim Harris, who somewhat resembled my description and was the only one at DEA that really had the power to make all this happen.

"To confirm that The Raven was Harris," Evans explained to me, "I had Hector send a communication asking The Raven to find out if the FBI had extracted information from any of Chupacabra's captured men regarded any of their other hideouts in the L.A. area. And lo and behold, twenty minutes later, I got a call from Harris asking me that very question. So that's when we set up this sting. Hector relayed to Harris that MS-13 wanted you for interrogation and elimination. They had the

information on your transport away from the safe house and were sending a team to Harris for him to use to make the interception. We feared that Harris might be suspicious of being asked to carry this out personally, but his ego got the better of him, and he actually considered it on honor to be so chosen.”

The confession in the back of the van, all captured on video, made Harris’ prosecution very easy, and relieved me of any need to appear in court. Instead, I just supplied a deposition and then Felix Ruiz disappeared from the face of the Earth to take on a new identity. It wasn’t clear if MS-13 had any interest in tracking me down, and Chupacabra is no longer the threat he once was—thanks in large part to Harris’ and MS-13’s mostly successful plot against him. But he’s still a dangerous fellow, and it all seemed best to keep me undercover.

I can’t tell you my new name, or where I am. I have a wife and a six-month old boy who know nothing of any of this, and probably never will. And I have a dog named Chalupa. I wanted to name him Chupacabra, but thought better of it. I am working as an editor for a midsized newspaper, with the assistance of the U.S. government, of course. But I can never get too famous or successful. It would be an exaggeration to say that I am a caged bird, but my wings have definitely been clipped. I guess you can say that I’m still paying for that free lunch.

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Brandon Crocker is the author of the novel *Burma Road* and has published numerous non-fiction essays and book reviews for *The American Spectator*, RealClearHistory.com, and other outlets. He lives in San Diego, where he recently retired as an executive at a commercial real estate development and management company.

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