



THE CLIFF: An Emilia Cruz Story

“It’s against Mexican law,” Emilia said.

“Driving a car?” the *gringo* asked skeptically.

“Just what is your relationship to the owners of this car and their driver?” Emilia asked. The man sitting next to her desk had yellow hair and a starched blue shirt and the impatient confidence all *norteamericanos* seemed to have.

“The Hudsons come to Acapulco every few months.” He pulled out a business card. “I manage the hotel where they stay.”

Emilia took the card. Kurt Rucker, General Manager, Palacio Réal Hotel,

Punta Diamante, Acapulco.

The Palacio Réal was one of the most exclusive and luxurious hotels in Acapulco, an architectural marvel clinging to the cliffs above the Punta Diamante on the southeastern edge of the city. Even the card was rich, with embossed printing and the hotel logo in the corner.

“Let me explain,” Emilia said. She carefully laid the card next to the arrest file on her desk and tried to look unimpressed as she settled back in her desk chair. “A Mexican citizen may not drive a vehicle that carries a foreign license plate without the foreign owners of the vehicle being in it.”

“So the problem was that the owners weren’t in the car,” Rucker said.

“Yes,” Emilia said. “Señor Ruiz was alone in the vehicle.”

“The Hudsons drive down to Mexico several times a year.” Rucker leaned toward her and one immaculate sleeve bumped the nameplate reading Detective Emilia Cruz Encinos. There were initials embroidered on his shirt cuff. Emilia resisted a sudden silly urge to run a finger over the stitching.

“They always hire Ruiz when they come,” he went on. “They travel all over and he does errands alone. There’s never had any trouble before. Monterrey, Mexico City, Guadalajara.”

“Well, señor.” Emilia moved her nameplate. “Here in Acapulco we enforce the law.”

“Of course.” His Spanish was excellent. “So how do the Hudsons get their car back?”

From across the squad room, Emilia saw Lieutenant Inocente watching her from the doorway to his office. *El teniente* nodded curtly at her then started talking to another detective. It was late afternoon and almost all the detectives were there making calls, writing up reports, joking and arguing.

Emilia opened the file and scanned the report of the arrest of Alejandro Ruiz Garcia, charged with illegally operating a vehicle with foreign *placas*. Three days ago he’d been arrested in front of the main branch of Banamex Bank. Bailed out by a cousin the next day. Ruiz had been driving a white Suburban owned by Harry and Lois Hudson of Flagstaff, Arizona. The vehicle was now sitting in the impound yard behind the police station. The keys were in Emilia’s purse.

“Why are you here instead of the Hudsons?” she asked.

“They returned to the United States,” Rucker said. “Before they left they asked me to help get the car back.”

“They left Mexico?” Emilia didn’t know why she should be so surprised. What was one car more or less to rich *norteamericanos*?

“They flew. Said it was a family emergency.”

Emilia closed the file. “Señor, in order for the Hudsons to regain possession of their car they must present proof of ownership.”

“Of course.” Rucker passed a paper across the desk. “Here is their title to the vehicle.”

It was a copy of an official-looking document. Emilia knew enough English to pick out words like name and number and address but it didn’t matter. The document was meaningless under Mexican law. She handed it back with a sigh. “Señor, they need to provide the history of the vehicle, including all sales transactions and verification of taxes paid every year of the car’s life.”

“What?” His eyes widened in disbelief.

They were the color of the ocean far beyond the cliffs at La Quebrada.

Emilia had never seen eyes like that and it took her a moment to realize he expected an answer and another moment to untangle her tongue. “After six months, if they have not produced the necessary documentation, the vehicle becomes the property of the state.”

The disbelief drained out of Rucker’s face as he realized she wasn’t joking. He exhaled sharply, as if he had the lungs of a swimmer, and his gaze traveled around the squad room, taking in the gray metal desks, ancient filing cabinets, and walls covered in posters, notices, and photographs from ongoing investigations. Most of the detectives were in casual clothes; those who’d been outside much of the day had shirts stained with sweat at the underarms and neck. All of them wore hip or shoulder holsters. Emilia wondered if Rucker realized that she was the only woman there.

El teniente went into his office and closed the door.

“There’s a complicating factor,” Rucker said to Emilia. “The Hudsons’ cell phone is out of service. I was hoping that you could give me the contact information for their driver. He might have another number for them.”

“I would have to check with my superior before giving out that sort of information,” Emilia said primly.

“I’d appreciate it if you would and then call me.” Rucker stood and held out his hand. “Thank you very much, Detective Cruz.”

“You’re welcome.” Emilia stood up, too, and shook his hand. His grip was dry and strong.

Rucker smiled at her, a wide smile that lit his face and made the blue-green eyes sparkle. His teeth were perfectly straight and white. He could have been a toothpaste ad, the kind with the government subtitle “Cleanliness is Healthy” written on the bottom for poor people who needed to know why to buy soap and shampoo.

Emilia smiled back, caught, knowing this was the wrong place and the wrong time and the wrong man but unable to stop smiling at this *gringo* whose world of wealth and leisure was light years away from the barrio she came from. She wished she was wearing something nicer than her work uniform of jeans, tee shirt and the Spanish walking sandals that had cost two months’ salary. Her gun was in a belt holster and her straight black hair was scraped back into its usual ponytail.

“*Oye!*”

Emilia gave a start and dropped Rucker’s hand. Her partner Rico loomed over her desk.

“You’re done here,” Rico said to Rucker, jerking his chin in Emilia’s direction, his leather jacket falling open to reveal his gun. “She’s got a man.”

Emilia felt her face flush with embarrassment and anger, but before she could say a word, Rucker held out his hand to Rico. “Kurt Rucker. Nice to meet you.”

The bustling squad room was suddenly silent. Lieutenant Inocente opened the door to his office and stood in the entrance again.

Disconcerted, Rico shook hands. The handshake held for a fraction too long. Emilia watched Rico’s round face tighten. He let go first.

Kurt Rucker nodded at Emilia and walked out of the squad room. The noise level went back to normal.

“Ricardo Portillo, you’re a *pendejo*,” Emilia hissed at Rico.

“That *gringo* has a grip like the bite of a horse,” Rico said in surprise, flexing his hand painfully.

“Don’t be lying and saying I’ve got a man unless I ask you to,” Emilia whispered hotly and slammed herself into her chair.

“Stay with your own kind, *chica*,” Rico warned.

“You’re not my mother.” Emilia jerked her chair around to face her computer, effectively ending the conversation. Rico made a snorting noise as he went back to his own desk.

Emilia typed in her password and checked her inbox. A review by the Secretariat de Gobernación of drug cartel activities across Mexico. A report of a robbery in Acapulco’s poorest neighborhood that would probably never be investigated. Notice of a reward for a child kidnapped in Ixtapa who was almost certainly dead by now.

Her phone rang. It was the desk sergeant saying that a Señor Rooker wished to see her. Emilia avoided Rico’s eye as she said, yes, the sergeant could let el señor pass into the detectives’ area.

A minute later Rucker was standing by her desk, sweat beaded on his forehead. The starched collar of his shirt was damp.

“There’s a head,” he said breathlessly. “Someone’s head in a bucket on the hood of my car.”



The bucket was light blue plastic with a metal handle and red handgrip, one of millions sold in mercados across Mexico. The head was that of Alejandro Ruiz Garcia, the recently arrested and released driver. There were burn marks around the mouth and inside the ears.

“*Madre de Dios*,” Rico said and crossed himself.

Beheadings and torture were the signature signs of a drug cartel hit. Emilia had seen death before, but rarely anything this grisly. The blood smelled sickly sweet in the warm evening air. She choked down bile and tears at the same time.

The crime scene technician eased a small piece of paper from the mouth. ““The small one cannot wait long,”” he read aloud.

Emilia looked at Kurt Rucker who shook his head unhappily. “It doesn’t mean anything to me,” he said.

The manner of death meant that the army was there as well as a swarm of police, all of them asking questions and scaring bystanders. Kurt Rucker’s dark green SUV was parked in an hourly lot about two blocks from the police station. Although the lot was surrounded by a concrete wall and there was only one way in or out, both panicked attendants claimed to have seen nothing. Across the street, a busy sidewalk café served *taquitos* and *empanadas* and Jarritos cola but no one there had seen anything, either.

After an hour of conflicting orders from the army captain and the lead crime scene technician, the head and bucket were dispatched to the morgue. Kurt Rucker’s SUV was towed to the vehicle lab to be dusted for prints and the parking lot was closed off with yellow PROHIBIDO EL PASO tape. As each owner of the cars remaining in the lot returned, their vehicle would be inspected for bloodstains and other clues that the car had

transported the bucket. Emilia knew that was a forlorn effort. Some cartel thug had walked or driven into the lot, deliberately placed the bucket on Kurt Rucker's vehicle, and left immediately.

They brought Rucker back to the police station and Rico took the hotel manager's statement. It was well after midnight before Lieutenant Inocente let them wrap it up.

"Señor Rucker, this was obviously a mistake," Lieutenant Inocente said, sounding tired but less abrupt than usual. "But stay in Acapulco. We may be calling you again." *El teniente* gestured at Emilia in the offhand way he had of giving her orders while seeming to ignore her at the same time. "Take him back to the Palacio Réal and then go home."

Lieutenant Inocente went into his office and Emilia gathered up her purse and jacket. Rico's eyes narrowed. "This is just orders from *el teniente*," he warned Rucker.

Emilia led the way through the back of the police station. The discovery of the head and the search for the body meant that more police than just the normal skeleton night crew were there. Both uniformed and plainclothes officers yawned and talked and drank coffee, vibrating with the gut-popping combination of dread, excitement, and adrenaline that an obvious cartel crime always provoked. As usual, Emilia got a few catcalls as they passed the holding cell guards and as usual she smiled and pretended to shoot them with her thumb and forefinger.

"Look," Rucker said. "I can take a taxi back to the hotel."

"Don't get me in trouble with Lieutenant Inocente," Emilia said and pushed open the door to the impound yard. "You'd be robbed in two minutes trying to get a taxi in this neighborhood."

She unlocked the white Suburban and they got in.

"Is this . . . ?" Rucker asked.

"The investigating detective gets to drive a confiscated car until the case is resolved," Emilia said.

Rucker didn't reply.

At the exit Emilia leaned out the driver's side window to show her identification to the impound yard guard. The big gate swung open.

The police station was located in the old part of Acapulco on the western side of the bay. Emilia drove through small streets, past the old cement buildings and billboards advertising Herdez vegetables and Tía Rosa snacks, getting the feel of the Suburban. She'd barely had a chance to drive it since being tossed the keys by Lieutenant Inocente the day Ruiz was arrested. "*Finalmente*," he'd said, which Emilia took to mean she'd finally landed a case with fringe benefits.

The streets widened as they turned onto la Costura, the city's main artery, and cruised through the center of Acapulco. Despite the late hour, traffic was heavy. The evening had just started at clubs like Carlos and Charlie's and Señor Frog's. The Malecón

beachfront vibrated with dance music. This was where the younger *turistas* came and shopped and spent money and saved the rest of them.

“I didn’t even know him,” Rucker said.

“I know.” Emilia had listened as Rico pushed Rucker hard. But Rucker’s story had been consistent. He’d managed the Palacio Réal for nearly two years and had no contact with Mexican police during that time. He knew Ruiz only in the context of the man being a seasonal employee of frequent hotel guests. As *el teniente* had said, it had to have been a mistake. Maybe the head was intended for the owner of a different car in the lot.

“So what’s with your partner?” Rucker asked. “Is he your bodyguard as well?”

Emilia shrugged. “You’re a *gringo*.”

“So I can’t talk to you?”

“Look,” Emilia said, torn between loyalty and attraction. “Two years ago I was the uniform cop who got the highest score on the detective exam. Even broke my nose in the hand-to-hand test. But they didn’t want a woman so they made up a new rule. I couldn’t become a detective unless somebody who already was a detective agreed to take me on as partner.” She looked away from the road to meet Rucker’s eyes. “Rico was the only one who stepped forward.”

Rucker’s gaze was disconcerting. “So you owe him?”

Emilia flushed. “Not like that,” she said.

They didn’t talk again as they left the lights of the city behind. The Suburban was heavy and unwieldy, laboring to climb the rises and wallowing in the declines. Emilia was glad for the quiet; all her energy was devoted to managing the vehicle.

It was at least a dozen miles to Punta Diamante, the picturesque spit of land southeast of the city. Along the way, la Costura became the coastal highway called the Carretera Escénica, winding high up the side of the mountain that guarded the most scenic bay in the world. The road was a ribbon of tarmac carved from the face of the cliff, two dark lanes without guardrails or a safety net. Far below, on Rucker’s side, the bay twinkled and shimmered under the night sky. A few cars passed heading toward Acapulco but for the most part they were alone on the road with nothing to spoil the dramatic scene of mountain curves and glittering ocean.

“You know the hotel entrance?” Rucker asked.

“Yes.” The Palacio Réal was part of an exclusive gated community built into the cliff face below the highway. From the huge *privada* gate a steeply pitched cobbled road led down to the water, linking private villas, a luxury condominium building, and the Palacio Réal hotel complex.

Emilia slowed to turn right into the gate entrance. Headlights blinked on in back of them and her rearview mirror suddenly filled with glare.

“Where’s the army checkpoint?” Rucker asked sharply.

All the major hotel entrances were guarded by the army. But tonight there was no big green vehicle, no soldiers milling around, nothing.

“*Jesu Cristo*,” Emilia gasped. She stamped on the accelerator, the engine groaned and the Suburban strained to pick up speed.

The headlights in her mirror suddenly grew large. As the Suburban passed the deserted *privada* gate a salvo of gunfire tore the night and something hit the back bumper with a dull thud. The heavy vehicle shuddered and slewed to the right.

Emilia broke out into a cold sweat as she fought the wheel, trying to keep the vehicle on the high mountain road. The tires on the right side lost traction along the cliff edge. Time stopped for a day and a year before the lethargic vehicle responded and rumbled toward the center of the road and then the rear window exploded, spraying glass inward. Emilia and Rucker both instinctively ducked as shards rained down but Emilia kept the accelerator pressed to the floor.

The Suburban lurched around a slight bend. The glare in her rearview was refracted for a moment and Emilia saw the vehicle behind them clearly. It was a small pickup, with at least four men braced in the bed. They all carried long guns.

“We can’t outrun them,” Rucker said.

“I know.”

“Brake and turn it.”

“*Madre de Dios*.” Before she gave herself time to think, Emilia hit the parking brake and swung the wheel to the left.

The small truck shot by as the Suburban screamed into the oncoming lane, tires chewing the tarmac, engine protesting. The mountainside loomed out of the inky darkness so fast Emilia felt the vehicle start to claw its way upwards. But momentum and gravity won out and the vehicle continued to spin.

The landscape was lost in a dizzying blur. Like a hand racing too fast around a clock face, they were pointed toward Acapulco in the right lane, then at the center of the road, then at the other lane, then straight at the cliff edge. Far below, white lines of waves rolled gently toward the sand, hypnotic and teasing.

Suddenly Rucker’s hands were on Emilia’s helping to straighten the wheel. He reached across her body and released the parking brake lever. The Suburban shuddered and surged forward, wind coming through the shot-out rear window like a monsoon. Together they wrestled the vehicle back into the right lane.

They hugged the mountain as the Suburban plunged down the highway back toward Acapulco. Emilia nearly lost control several times as the heavy vehicle was propelled by its own weight. Next to her, Rucker kept a lookout for the truck but didn’t see it. “Maybe they tried the same thing and went over the cliff,” he said.

“No.” Emilia saw the welcome glow of the city and turned off the headlights in a vain attempt to hide. “They know where you live. They’ll just wait for you to come back.”

The night was very black. Once they hit town Emilia wove through the narrow barrio streets she knew so well until she was sure they hadn’t been followed. The

neighborhoods were deserted. She parked the Suburban in an alley, killed the engine, and found she couldn't breathe.

"You did good out there," Rucker said, his voice like a safe haven in the darkness.

Emilia nodded and sucked in air. Her face was wet.

"You okay?" Rucker asked.

"What do these people want from you?" Emilia's voice sounded harsher than she intended. She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "Did you lie to Rico?"

"A better question might be who knew you were taking me to the Palacio Réal," Rucker said.

Emilia blinked at him as fear surged into her throat yet again.

Rucker folded his arms and stared out the windshield. The neighborhood was nothing more than trash and cement and cardboard roofs that would last only until the next rainy season. "We've got twenty of these cars at the hotel for hauling luggage and guests," he said. "Fully loaded, none of them handle this bad."

"What are you talking about?"

"This car is hauling something."

"*Jesu Cristo*, we could be sitting on a ton of cocaine," Emilia managed. Everything connected. "Somebody wants it and you've been the only link to the car since Ruiz got arrested and the Hudsons left."

"Know anybody who can take a car apart?" Rucker asked.

Emilia swallowed hard. "Yes."



Three hours later they were staring at five million green *Estados Unidos* dollars piled on the floor in her uncle Ernesto's auto repair shop. The rear body panels of the Suburban were off, exposing the ingenious system welded into the car frame to accommodate brick-sized packages. Even the four-wheel drive mechanism had been cannibalized to create more hidden hauling capacity.

"Money in, cocaine out," Emilia said. "The Hudsons are mules."

Rucker fingered one of the dollar bills, his forehead furrowed with thought. The hotel manager had worked side-by-side with Tío Ernesto as if he repaired cars in a greasy garage every day. His beautifully starched shirt had been cast aside, revealing a white singlet undershirt and muscular arms. Both the white undershirt and his khaki pants were now as dirty and oil-spotted as Tío Ernesto's coveralls.

"These are brand new bills," he said.

"So?" Emilia got him a glass of water from the big jug of Electropura purified water. Tío Ernesto had gone to the one-bedroom apartment over the shop to tell Tía Lourdes to make them all some breakfast.

“A couple of years ago they changed the design of American money.” Rucker spread several bills on the tool bench. “Made the image bigger. Added a tint. New watermarks.” He took a swallow of water. “But these are the old design.”

“What are you saying?” Emilia ran her finger over the crisp paper. “It’s counterfeit?”

“Only way to find out is with one of those bank scanners.”

“Ruiz was arrested in front of the Banamex,” Emilia said slowly.

“I know the manager at Citibank,” Rucker said. “He’ll scan it for us and won’t say anything, either.”

He leaned against the tool bench as he studied the money, his *norteamericano* confidence undimmed despite the setting. Oil filters and alternator belts were stacked haphazardly on shelves, plastic jugs of used oil filled a corner, a garbage can overflowed and at least one rat had scurried away when a bleary-eyed Tío Ernesto opened the door and waved in the Suburban. Then Emilia had felt as if the garage was a sanctuary. Now she wasn’t so sure she’d done the right thing.

“I grew up here,” she blurted.

Rucker looked up at her, eyebrows raised above the blue-green eyes.

“My father died when I was little,” Emilia heard herself say. “Tío Ernesto is his brother. My mother and I came to live here with him and Tía Lourdes and their two boys. Six people in a one bedroom apartment.”

Rucker didn’t react.

“My cousins taught me how to fight. How to keep away from the cartel *sicarios* and the other men who wanted girls to sell to the *turistas*.” She was challenging him for no good reason, throwing the *barrio*’s harshness at him as if it was his fault. “My mother wasn’t right after my father died. She didn’t work and we didn’t have any money. Most weekends I sold candy or fruit at the highway toll booths. Until my cousin Alvaro helped me to join the police. That’s when my mother and I moved into our own house. Being a detective is good money but not for a place like the Palacio Réal.”

Rucker pushed himself away from the tool bench, took out his wallet, and slowly and deliberately folded several of the *Estados Unidos* bills inside. He replaced the wallet in his hip pocket, peeled off the stained singlet and picked up his dress shirt. Emilia watched the muscles of his chest and abdomen flex as he put on the shirt and buttoned it.

“By the time I was six I was the best milker in the family,” Rucker said evenly. “On a dairy farm everybody milks the cows twice a day. Cows don’t care if you’re sick. If it’s freezing cold. They still need to be milked.”

He rolled up the shirt sleeves, hiding the monogram. “When I was 18 I’d milked enough cows to last me a lifetime and I enlisted in the Marine Corps. Fought in a couple of places. When I got out I went to college. Studied hotel and restaurant management so I could spend time in places as far from that farm as I could get. Sent my parents a couple of tickets last year to come visit but they’d rather stay with the cows.”

They looked at each other. An awkward silence was broken by the sound of footsteps and rattling pans overhead.

Rucker gestured at the dismantled Suburban. “Well, Detective, the bank will open in about an hour. How do we want to get there?”

“I think that you could call me Emilia,” she said.



They took an anonymous green and white *libre* taxi to the bank. Rucker’s friend was the manager, a polished Spaniard who swallowed a comment about Rucker’s appearance as Emilia displayed her detective badge.

Ten minutes later, the currency scanner confirmed Rucker’s theory. The money was counterfeit.

“Excellent fakes,” the bank manager said. “And given that there are just a handful of currency scanners in Acapulco for this high a denomination of American bill, quite a clever scheme.”

“You never saw us,” Emilia said. “You never saw these bills.”



By the time they were back in the garage, Emilia had made up her mind. She didn’t tell Rucker until they were alone in Tía Lourdes’s kitchen. She could tell he didn’t like the idea. But he didn’t have anything better to suggest.

“If we don’t let them find the car and the money they’re never going to leave you alone,” Emilia insisted.

“How are you going to explain losing a car?”

Emilia rubbed her eyes. Last night’s adrenaline had ebbed, leaving her tired and shaky. “We won’t lose it. They want the money, not the car. We can pull a spark plug to make sure they leave it and pick it up later.”

“We’re letting them win,” Rucker said.

“We’re making sure you stay alive.” Emilia opened her purse and pulled out a pen, paper, and her cell phone. “We’ll copy the serial numbers from the bills to trace the money. That way we might even catch who’s passing it.”

Rucker slumped in his chair and nodded. “All right.”

She dialed Rico.

“You sure you trust him?” Rucker asked abruptly.

Emilia heard Rico’s voice grunt “*Bueno?*” For a wild moment she wondered if Rucker was right. But if she couldn’t trust Rico then there was no one to trust at all. Kurt Rucker looked away as she told Rico what had happened and what they needed him to do.



They reassembled the Suburban and its counterfeit load and abandoned it on a little rocky outcropping along the Carretera Escénica about two miles past the gate to the Palacio Réal.

Rucker broke the spark plug just as Rico drove up at the wheel of an old *libre* taxi. Emilia and Rucker jumped in the back and then they were gone.

The taxi was one of thousands and attracted no attention as it pattered up to the *privada* gate. The army checkpoint was in place. The sergeant studied Kurt Rucker's identification before gesturing to his corporal to open the gate.

The brakes on the old taxi strained against the steep pitch of the road as they passed the carefully manicured foliage of the luxury villas. All of the villas cost tens of millions of pesos, Emilia knew. Several Hollywood stars had homes there, as did many of Mexico's entertainment and business elite. Every meter down the road was a step further away from Kurt Rucker.

His arrival at the Palacio Réal confirmed the distance. As Rucker climbed out of the taxi in his stained khakis and rumped shirt, a platoon of uniformed doorman and bellhops swarmed around him. More staff materialized, all smartly dressed, the women in the hotel's signature blue print dresses, the men in stone-colored slacks and coordinating blue shirts. *Señor Rooker, we were so worried . . . Señor Rooker, we had a problem with . . . Señor Rooker, you need to call . . .*

Rucker stepped away from the throng for a moment and met Emilia's eyes. She smiled tightly. He gave her a little salute and went into the hotel.

Through the glass doors Emilia could see a wide lobby open to the ocean. People in clean white clothes carried cool drinks as they walked by the grand piano.

"Not your kind, *chica*," Rico said. He put the car in gear and they started the long painful drive up the steep road to the highway.



The next morning Emilia and Rico went back to the Suburban. It had been dismantled and the money taken out. The body panels seemed to have been replaced in a hurry. The rear fenders were hung at an awkward angle and all four of the doors were jammed closed. Rico raised the hood and put in a new spark plug.

Emilia looked past the vehicle to the bay. Kurt Rucker was in his hotel right below where she was standing. Maybe having his breakfast, his clothes cleaned and pressed by the hotel staff. Maybe on the telephone, giving orders. He'd already forgotten the terrifying moments when their hands were locked together on the steering wheel. Forgotten telling her about working on a farm.

Forgotten her.

The sound of crying lifted on the warm salty breeze. Emilia walked back to the Suburban and nearly had a stroke.

A small boy about five years old was huddled on the floor of the back seat, partially concealed by a dirty blanket. Both of his hands were swathed in bloody bandages.

“Rico!” Emilia shouted and somehow wrenched open the rear passenger door. The child cringed, his face contorted in fear and pain.

Emilia eased herself onto the floor of the Suburban next to him. Shards of glass were everywhere. The child lifted his hands in their bloodstained bandages as if to ward her off. Emilia realized with a jolt that his thumbs were missing. “It’s all right,” she breathed. “I’m going to take you home.”

“*Madre de Dios.*” Rico leaned over the front seat. “It’s the child from Ixtapa. The kidnapping from Ixtapa.”

The boy nodded and his face crumpled. “I want to go home,” he sobbed. “Mama.”

Emilia pulled him close. She rocked him as he cried, her own body shaking. “The small one cannot wait long,” she whispered to Rico. “We paid the ransom.”



It was a rare meeting of all the detectives. They stood in a knot in the middle of the squad room, joking in low voices as they waited for *el teniente* to come out of his office and tell them why he’d called the meeting.

Emilia talked with those few who’d gotten used to having her around. It had been two weeks since she’d driven the Suburban back to the impound yard and claimed that hooligans had shot out the rear window while she was investigating a robbery in a bad neighborhood. Lieutenant Inocente had signed the requisition for new glass without comment.

Since then the investigation into Ruiz’s death had more or less stalled out. Attempts to find out which army sergeant was working the night she and Rucker were going to the Palacio Réal had led nowhere. None of the money had turned up, but ransom money almost never did.

She and Rucker had spoken once. A call to tell him about the kidnapping. She’d stammered through an account of finding the child, Rucker’s voice making her feel unaccountably foolish and unsettled, then abruptly ended the conversation.

Lieutenant Inocente walked out of his office and the detectives fell silent. *El teniente* held up a clipboard. “I have a letter to read.”

He cleared his throat and peered at the clipboard. “This letter of commendation goes to Detectives Ricardo Portillo and Emilia Cruz Encinos for the recovery of Bernardo Estragon Morelos de Gama. The child was rescued by the detectives and will make a full

recovery from his ordeal. The Morelos de Gama family extends heartfelt gratitude and this reward to these two outstanding Acapulco detectives.”

The detectives applauded. Emilia managed a weak smile as Lieutenant Inocente handed her a thick envelope. Rico’s face wreathed into a huge grin as he accepted his own.

There were congratulations all around and some beers to share before the squad room settled down and the rest of the day went on. Rico locked his envelope in his desk drawer and Emilia did the same; less important items than cold cash frequently disappeared in the squad room.

Emilia spent the rest of the morning wondering how much money was in the envelope. She would buy her mother a new dress. They could both get their hair done in a real salon. Splurge on a meal in a restaurant. She and Rico exchanged little smiles of anticipation.

At noon Lieutenant Inocente dropped the keys to Kurt Rucker’s SUV on her desk. “Call him and tell him to pick it up today. The paperwork’s ready.” *El teniente’s* gaze included both Emilia and Rico. “You should open the reward.”

He’d said it like an order. Both Emilia and Rico unlocked their drawers and took out the envelopes. Emilia opened hers and took out 500 very familiar *Estados Unidos* dollars with small images of a *norteamericano* president.

Her heart beat so fast that for a moment her vision blurred.

“Congratulations,” *el teniente* said.

“Thank you,” she managed.

Rico’s face was set in a blank smile. Lieutenant Inocente nodded at both of them and went into his office.

Without changing expression, Rico stared at Emilia until his meaning was clear. She made a conscious effort to relax her face muscles and breathe. Rico finally gave a barely imperceptible nod and replaced his money in the drawer.

Emilia put her money in her pocket, got out Kurt Rucker’s business card and left a message with the hotel that he should pick up his car at the police station.

He came a few hours later. Two weeks hadn’t changed him, although this time he was wearing jeans and a black polo shirt and looked faintly more tan.

“You need to sign some paperwork,” Emilia said before Rucker even had a chance to say hello. She stood up with his keys in her hand. “Please follow me.”

She felt Rico’s eyes on her as she led Rucker out of the squad room and down the hallway. They went past the holding cell guards and Emilia smiled and shot them with her thumb and forefinger. At the impound counter she asked the secretary for the paperwork. They waited, Emilia painfully aware of Rucker standing calmly beside her.

The secretary finished her cigarette, lounged over to a file cabinet, licked her fingers and pulled a file out of a drawer. She studied the contents as if she’d never seen a typed

form before. Eventually she replaced the file in the drawer, licked her fingers again and found another.

His was the fourth one. The secretary thumbed through it, left it on her desk, and disappeared through a doorway into an interior office.

“She probably hasn’t worked here long,” Rucker observed. It was the only thing he’d said since coming.

“Sixteen years,” Emilia said.

The secretary came back holding a light blue plastic bucket with a metal handle and a red handgrip, one of millions sold in *mercados* across Mexico. She thrust it at Rucker along with the paperwork to sign. “You’re to take this,” she said.

Emilia felt the message like a physical blow. Rucker signed the paperwork. It was duly stamped with the authority of the police, the city of Acapulco, the police officers’ union, the state of Guerrero, and the self-importance of the secretary. Finally everything was in order and Rucker was handed the holy form giving him permission to take his car off police property.

Emilia pushed open the door to the impound yard. The late afternoon heat pressed against the rows of cars. The yard appeared deserted. Rucker stopped walking and turned to Emilia.

She handed him the reward envelope.

He put down the bucket and opened the envelope. Emilia saw surprise cross his face at the sight of the bills. “Where’d you get this?” he asked.

“From *el teniente*.” Emilia heard the bitterness in her voice. “Our reward for solving the kidnapping of that poor child. The ‘small one.’”

“He called off the army that night, didn’t he?” Rucker asked, fiddling with the envelope. “He’s a dirty cop, Emilia. In on that kidnapping. This is to let you know he’s thinks he can scare you. Or buy you. You have to report him.”

“Report him?” Emilia laughed, a short bark that sounded more like a sob. “Who would I report him to? The army officers he paid off? The chief of police who chose him for the job? The union official who gets a take? The mayor who appointed all of them? Which of them would protect me?”

“They can’t all be dirty,” Rucker said and handed back the envelope.

“I’m the one holding the fake money,” Emilia snapped and jammed the envelope into the back pocket of her jeans. “The *chica* detective nobody wanted in the first place.”

Rucker stared at her for a moment as the truth of what she was saying sank in. “There’s got to be something.”

“It’ll be like it always is,” Emilia said harshly. “A few clean cops, a few dirty ones. Some get rich and some get dead and you hope the cartels don’t win in the end.”

Rucker touched her cheek. “Are you scared?”

Emilia’s throat was suddenly tight and her eyes burned. She shrugged.

“Have dinner with me,” Rucker said. “Come down to the hotel and we’ll sit by the beach. We’ll figure something out.”

The sun was low in the sky, sending streaks of light across the roofs of the parked cars. Emilia tried to imagine herself explaining a relationship with a *gringo* to her mother. To Rico. To her cousins.

“There’s nothing to figure out,” she said, forcing the words out around the lump in her throat. “It’s like they always say. ‘Poor Mexico. So far from God, so close to the United States.’”

There was a movement at the open door to the shed by the impound yard gate. A uniformed cop came out and stood where he could see them.

Rucker looked around. Emilia followed his gaze to his green SUV in the second row of vehicles. He looked back at her. “I guess I should go.”

Emilia nodded.

“Stay safe,” he said.

“No promises,” Emilia replied.

Rucker’s face tensed, then he turned and walked away. Emilia watched him. The light blue plastic bucket dangled from his fingertips as he passed between the rows of cars.

She went back inside and into the women’s public restroom. The latch on the door of the farthest stall was blurry as she struggled to lock it.

Emilia gulped air and fought the urge to sob. She yanked the envelope out of her pocket. She would rip those *maldita* bills unto bits, flush them down the toilet, and deny she’d ever seen them.

She opened the envelope and her tears gave way to an unexpected gasp of laughter.

Alongside the counterfeit money was a fancy laminated coupon for a free drink at the Palacio Réal’s Pasodoble Bar.

El Fin

Thank you for reading THE CLIFF.

This short story became the start of CLIFF DIVER, in which Detective Emilia Cruz must investigate the death of a dirty cop. With a blood-spattered crime scene, no witnesses, and an unhealthy interest on the part of the head of the police union, when Emilia dives into the case she might just hit the rocks instead of the water.

Thank you for reading THE CLIFF: An Emilia Cruz Story.

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In addition to political thriller *The Hidden Light of Mexico City*, Carmen Amato is the author of the Emilia Cruz mystery novels set in Acapulco, including *Cliff Diver* and *Hat Dance*. Originally from New York, her books draw on her experiences living in Mexico and Central America. A cultural observer and occasional nomad, she currently divides her time between the United States and Central America. Visit her website at <http://carmenamato.net/> and follow her on Twitter [@CarmenConnects](#).