

THE DETECTIVE EMILIA CRUZ STARTER LIBRARY

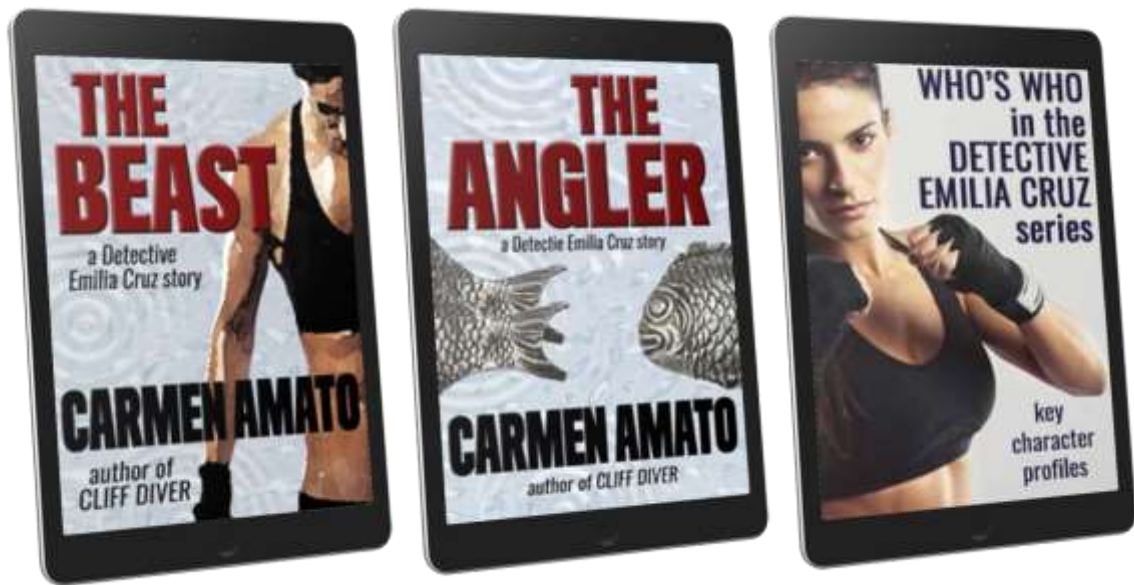


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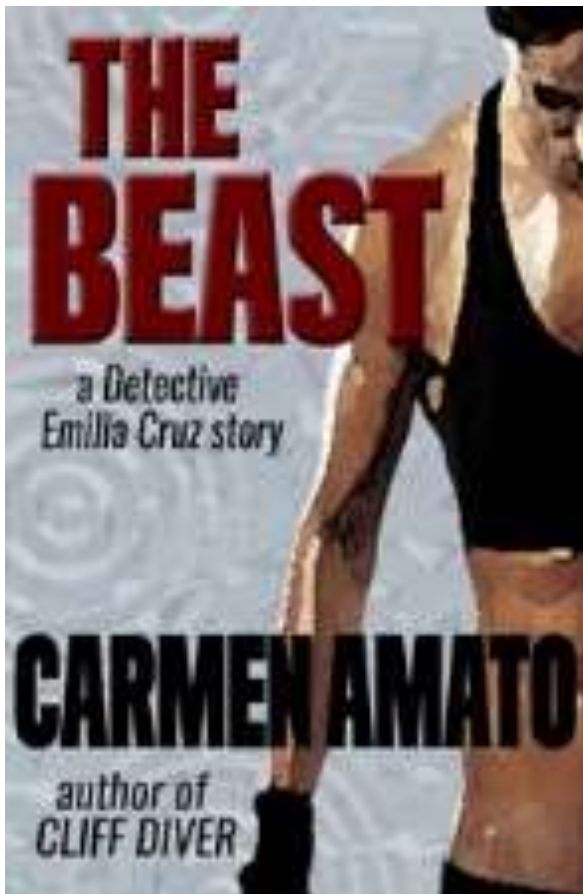
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P.S. Look for my Mystery Ahead newsletter every other Sunday.

THE BEAST: An Emilia Cruz Story



Her opponent's flailing hand connected with the bridge of her nose and Emilia Cruz Encinos heard the snap before she felt the pain. Her eyes watered and her muscles screamed as she twisted far enough to protect her face by pushing it into the mat.

Montez was at least 20 kilos heavier than Emilia but he carried too much of it in his middle. She knew he was tired and desperate. They'd each had four fights that day, slowly eliminating the other competitors. It was simple hand-to-hand fighting with few rules except to make the opponent tap the mat in surrender. Montez had opened the fight by trying to pull off her shirt, as had another male competitor earlier in the day. Both had been defeated by a combination of rubbery fabric, her heavy sports bra, and Emilia's fist.

Emilia and Montez were both slippery with sweat. He arched his body, trying to break her chokehold or shake off the legs wrapped around his. Somehow Emilia managed to crank up the pressure on his throat while keeping his lower half pinned.

I'm a beast. A beast. The words circled inside her head. The voice of the referee and the shouts of the

other cops in the gymnasium merged into an indistinguishable background roar.

Montez's hand slapped wildly, trying to find Emilia's face again. For a scary moment she thought he'd latched onto her hair, which was tightly pulled into a single braid and clamped to her head with a steel barrette, but he only succeeded in banging her head against the mat. Bloody snot gushed out of her nose and Emilia heard herself gasp for air around her mouth guard.

The crook of her elbow was a vice around his neck, cranked ever tighter by the leverage of her other hand. Montez jerked hard then rolled sideways, trying to break her hold with dead weight. Emilia held on. Her whole world was this moment, this stinking mat, this iron beast that she'd become.

But her vision was beginning to darken, there wasn't enough air and the roaring was a wave threatening to pull her under. It surged with hot hands, prying her arms apart but she was a beast, a fucking beast and she was going to—.

"Prima, let go." Her cousin Alvaro's voice cut through the wave and the roar and the mantra in her head. "You're killing him!"

Hands dragged her upright. Emilia stumbled like a drunken *borracho*, leg muscles quivering, and Alvaro grabbed her around the waist. The ring was full of people, including Alvaro who'd acted as her coach and Montez's friend who'd been in his corner all day. The police doctor and two other men she didn't recognize were bent over Montez lying prone on the mat. Beyond the ropes,

at least 100 cops filled the gymnasium in Acapulco's central police building, most of them on their feet and shouting.

"You couldn't just let him tap out, *prima*?" Alvaro asked, his mouth close to her ear. He shoved a wet cloth against her face as he pulled her to a corner of the ring. "You had to choke him out?"

Emilia wiped her face then spit her mouth guard into her hand. Bloody saliva clung to the bloody tape that protected both hands. She rinsed her mouth and spat into a bucket. The referee motioned her to the middle of the canvas. Montez was on his feet. Sweat ran down his bare chest and he looked dazed.

The gymnasium quieted.

"The winner of the final elimination round in the detective competition." The referee sounded more than a little stunned. He grabbed Emilia's wrist and lifted her arm over her head. "By a knockout. Cruz Encinos."

There was a smatter of applause.

And then there was silence.



By Monday, the broken nose hardly hurt at all, although Emilia still looked like she was wearing purple goggles from the two black eyes that went along with it. She hauled out her body armor vest with POLICIA stenciled across the back and closed her locker door. Alma Rosa shut her own locker and the two women stared at each other for a long moment.

"Congratulations," Alma Rosa said. She put her vest down on the bench.

Emilia nodded. "Thanks."

Alma Rosa had been her second fight on Saturday. Emilia had forced the smaller woman to tap out in less than 30 seconds. The short fight meant that Emilia was still relatively fresh by the time she came up against Montez.

"No hard feelings," Alma Rosa said. She held out her hand. "You won it fair. I never would have gotten past Montez."

Emilia took her hand then pulled the other woman into an embrace. There weren't that many female cops and even fewer good ones. Alma Rosa fell into that small group.

They picked up their vests and headed out of the locker room.

"Cruz!"

Emilia turned to see Montez charging down the hall. Alma Rosa grimaced and continued into the briefing room. At the beginning of every shift the roll was taken, assignments handed out, weapons were issued, and cops patted down to make sure they weren't carrying anything that they could use to strike a deal with gang members or cartel *sicarios*.

"What are you doing here, Montez?" Emilia asked. She'd learned a little about each of the other cops who'd scored high enough on the detective's exam to move to the hand-to-hand competition. Montez had a desk job in the administration building. Emilia's station in central Acapulco was foreign territory for him.

He lifted a black metal briefcase. "Courier duty," he said. "But I was hoping to run into you. What the fuck was going on with you on Saturday?"

"Sorry," Emilia said. "I didn't realize you'd tapped out."

He didn't look much the worse for wear; he was about her age, skin slightly pockmarked, short hair slicked back from a low forehead.

“I didn’t tap out,” Montez said, jamming himself in front of Emilia. “You were supposed to let up.”

Emilia blinked in surprise. “I was just supposed to let you win?”

Montez forced Emilia up against the wall. “They’re never going to give you that job. You should have let me take the competition. That way at least somebody could make detective this year. Now everybody’s screwed.”

“I got the highest score on the detective exam,” Emilia said, her voice taut. The blood pounded in her ears. “I won the hand-to-hand. So back off. Unless you want a rematch. Right here, right now.”

The door to the briefing room swung open and Sergeant Orozco stepped into the hallway, clipboard in hand.

“Cruz,” he said. “Need to speak with you.”

“Excuse me, *mi sargento*,” Montez said and rapidly walked away.

“You’re out of uniform, Cruz,” Sergeant Orozco said. One of the oldest uniformed cops, he had leathery skin and dark hooded eyes.

Emilia got her breathing under control and looked down at herself. She had on the blue shirt, navy pants, and gun belt that she’d worn six days a week for nearly ten years.

“You’re not going on shift looking like that,” *el sargento* went on. He pointed two fingers at her face but didn’t make eye contact. “Three days suspension without pay.”

Emilia caught herself before she asked if that’s how much he’d lost betting on Montez.

Alvaro had warned her. A uniformed cop himself, Alvaro had helped her join the force and been her guide through the early years. They’d talked about what she could expect if she tried to become a detective. Who would sabotage her efforts or take punitive action if she succeeded.

Even so, three days’ worth of salary was a serious loss and she felt it like a blow to the head. What made it worse was that she hadn’t expected the blow to come from Sergeant Orozco. *El sargento* had signed the supervisory recommendation required to take the detective exam. He’d even congratulated her first place score.

“On Thursday report to Lieutenant Inocente in the detectives unit,” Sergeant Orozco said. “Other building. I’m sending your file over today.”

Emilia nodded once. Back in the locker room she shucked off her uniform, put on her jeans and tee shirt, breathing fast through her mouth, eyes burning, refusing to cry.



Emilia presented herself at the small station on the west side of Acapulco, where the city wrapped around the lip of the bay at Playa Caleta and the divers put on their shows at La Quebrada. She didn’t wear her uniform, just jeans, a black tee, and the short leather jacket that had taken six months of diligent saving to buy. Her straight dark hair was pulled into a ponytail and a careful makeup job concealed the last bruises around her eyes, which had faded to the color of premium tequila.

The sergeant behind the dispatch desk scrutinized her badge when she pressed it against the bulletproof glass. He hit the intercom. “You’re Cruz?” he asked, his voice artificially metallic.

When he said her name three other uniforms came out of a room behind the sergeant’s desk and stared at her through the thick glass.

It was like being a fish on the wrong side of the aquarium. “Yes,” Emilia said, replacing her badge on its lanyard around her neck. “Here to see Lieutenant Inocente.”

“I heard you was bigger,” one of the uniforms said.

Emilia tried a wry smile.

“Down the hall,” the sergeant said. “Detectives unit. His office is through the squadroom.”

The heavy metal door buzzed. The latch popped and Emilia pulled the door open. She followed the sounds of arguing down the hall and into the detectives squadroom.

It wasn't a glamorous place, just a large open area with the same gray metal desks, green filing cabinets, and big wall boards covered with photographs and memos that she'd seen in other Acapulco police unit offices. But this place represented the top of her career path, the place where she'd put “Detective” in front of her name.

The place where her salary would double.

She crossed the room to the office door at the far end, getting some appraising looks from the half dozen men there. They all wore shoulder holsters and had individual computers. Emilia didn't know any of them, which wasn't surprising. Detectives maintained a very low profile to avoid being targeted by the cartels operating up and down Mexico's Pacific coast.

Lieutenant Inocente was a fit man with an expensive haircut and trim moustache. Maybe in his late thirties, he wore a starched white shirt, dress pants, and a dark tie. His office was sterile, as if he didn't plan on being there long. “Let me see your file,” he said. He made an impatient give-it-here gesture across the desk.

No invitation to sit down, no welcome to the club or any other greeting.

“Sergeant Orozco sent it over on Monday,” Emilia said.

Lieutenant Inocente rolled his eyes. “It'll be in Records, then,” he said. “Right out of the squadroom, past the holding cells. Ask for Fabiola.” He turned his attention to a file folder on his desk, effectively dismissing her.

Emilia again ran the gauntlet of appraising eyes. The uniforms at the holding cells made kissing noises as she passed. Obviously the sergeant behind the bulletproof glass had let everyone in the station know that the new detective was there.

Supplicants to the records department were kept at bay by means of a counter running the width of the room. The counter was at least a meter wide, meaning few could reach over it. Beyond the counter there were three desks. At the rear of the space, metal shelves stretched to the ceiling, all jammed with file folders of varying thicknesses.

Fabiola was twice Emilia's age, with a greying perm, glasses on a string around her neck and a mouth that twisted in disapproval when Emilia identified herself. The woman folded thick arms as she stood well back from the counter. “We don't keep personnel files here in Records,” she said.

“Sergeant Orozco sent it over on Monday,” Emilia pressed. “For Lieutenant Inocente.”

“Maybe Lieutenant Inocente didn't need it,” Fabiola said evenly.

“Could you check?” Emilia asked, ignoring the woman's implication.

Fabiola sniffed. “Come back in 15 minutes,” she said.

It was the classic Mexican brush-off. Nothing would change in 15 minutes and both of them knew it.

“It looks like my file's been lost in transit somehow,” Emilia said to Lieutenant Inocente ten minutes later. “If you need it today, I can go run it down. But first I'd like to talk with you about the job.”

Lieutenant Inocente leaned back in his chair. As before, he hadn't invited her to sit so Emilia stayed standing in front of his desk. “Cruz,” he said. “I've heard that you did everything by the book. Outstanding patrol record. Got a real nice recommendation from your sergeant. Highest

grade on the exam. Won the hand-to-hand.” He ran a finger over his moustache. “But the detective unit is a tight-knit group. Can’t say that you’re a good fit.”

“Let me assure you, *teniente*,” Emilia said. “I’m a team player. I will be giving this job my best effort.”

Lieutenant Inocente slowly sat upright. “Let me put this in a way you’ll understand, Cruz,” he said. “Unless one of my detectives steps up and says they’ll take you on as partner, you just wasted a lot of time and energy going after this job.”

Emilia felt a rush of anger. “That wasn’t a criteria last year,” she pointed out. “Or the year before. Or any year.”

“You’re not last year,” Lieutenant Inocente said.

He got out of his chair and walked past her into the squadroom. Emilia followed.

“This is Cruz Encinos,” Lieutenant Inocente said loudly and every man in the room turned to look. “You’ve all heard she’s the detective candidate from the ranks this year. If one of you wants to partner with her, she’ll be joining the squadroom.” He looked around and the words *if not* hung in the air. He shifted his eyes to his watch. “She’ll be in Interrogation 1 for the next hour. Anybody who wants a new partner can go fix it up with her.”



The painted cinderblock walls of the windowless interrogation room had once been white. Even with the door open, the ripe odor of fear and unwashed bodies thickened the air. She wondered how many brutal confessions or conveniently forgotten suspects the room had seen.

Emilia checked her watch. Thirty minutes had ticked by as she alternatively paced or stood in the doorway, staring down the hall at the holding cell guards. When one of the guards had asked what she was doing there, she’d just said “Special assignment” and shot him with her thumb and forefinger.

There was no two-way mirror so she knew Lieutenant Inocente wasn’t watching, but not sitting at the battered wooden table was a matter of pride. She wasn’t some criminal brought in for questioning. Besides, there was too much fury and humiliation coursing through her system to sit even if she’d wanted to.

Five minutes were left in the hour when a heavysset man came down the hall. He was in his early thirties, maybe five or six years older than her, wearing a leather jacket and holding a pair of expensive sunglasses.

He came into the room, closed the door and stuck out a beefy hand. “Rico Portillo,” he said.

Emilia shook hands, glad that he didn’t start a squeeze contest as many male cops did. “Emilia Cruz Encinos.”

“Yeah, sure.” Portillo ambled around the room, clearly uncomfortable. He stopped when the table was between him and Emilia. “I hear you’re looking to become a detective,” he said.

“I’d really like a shot at this,” Emilia heard herself say. “I’m a hard worker. I don’t give up. You don’t throw me under the bus, I won’t throw you, either.”

“Yeah.” Portillo didn’t say anything else, just fiddled with his sunglasses. After a moment he scratched his head. “The thing is,” he said finally. “Right now I’m stuck with Gomez. He’s dumb as wood. Dumb enough to get me killed one of these days.”

“I got the highest score on the detective exam,” Emilia said.

Portillo scratched his head again.

Emilia held her breath.

“You gonna turn around in three months and tell me that you’re pregnant?” Portillo asked.

The air went out of Emilia all at once. “No,” she said stiffly.

“You got a man?” Portillo asked. “You know, regular?”

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” Emilia snapped. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

“Hey.” Portillo tossed his sunglasses on the table and raised his hands in mock surrender. “Can’t blame me for trying. You’re no dog, you know.”

“Is that why you came in here?” Suddenly Emilia was done pushing and cajoling and fighting to get this job and everything it represented. If her only chance to make detective was teaming up with a dirty cop, she couldn’t do it. “Just to see if you could get a good fuck out of it? Is that the kind of cop you are? The kind that’s in it to see what they can score?”

Portillo planted his hands on the scarred tabletop. The awkwardness was gone and she wondered if it had been an act; a barrier while he assessed her. “I became a cop,” he said. “Because the soul of this city is being eaten alive by the cartels and the crooks. Some of us want to save what’s left.”

“The soul of this city,” Emilia repeated, unconvinced. “Did you make that up yourself?”

“No.” Portillo reached under his jacket and pulled out a manila folder. He slapped it down on the table.

Emilia saw her name printed on the label, followed by her police identification number.

“It was in your personnel file,” Portillo said. “End of your exam essay.”



Acapulco Chief of Police Enrique Salazar Robelo moved down the line of those being promoted. His assistant Lieutenant Morales held out the framed certificate of the next officer. Castro Cardoso, being promoted to Captain.

Salazar shook Castro’s hand. They chatted, Salazar holding Castro’s handshake in both of his own for a moment of genuine congratulations. Salazar then took the heavy certificate from Morales and handed it to Castro. The official photographer snapped several pictures as the audience in the large auditorium applauded. Next, Morales handed Salazar the captain’s badge and Castro ceremoniously exchanged it for his old lieutenant’s badge. The captain’s badge was more ornate, with Acapulco’s seal of a hand holding stalks of wheat enameled in color. The photographer took a few more pictures.

Salazar stepped to the next officer being promoted. Rocha Zelaya. Promoted to lieutenant. New assignment as liaison to the head of the police union for the state of Guerrero. “*Vaya con Dios*,” Salazar said as he extended his hand to Rocha. The union was a snake pit and Rocha would need all the help he could get.

The last officer in the line on the stage was Cruz Encinos.

“I expect it had to happen sometime,” Salazar said, forcing himself to smile. “First female detective in Acapulco. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He gave her the heavy certificate. There was scattered applause as they traded her patrol officer’s shield for a new detective badge.

“I won’t let Acapulco down,” Cruz said and held out her hand.

Salazar pressed his lips together as she waited. There was an audience. He had no choice.

Her grip matched his. Surprised, he let go first.

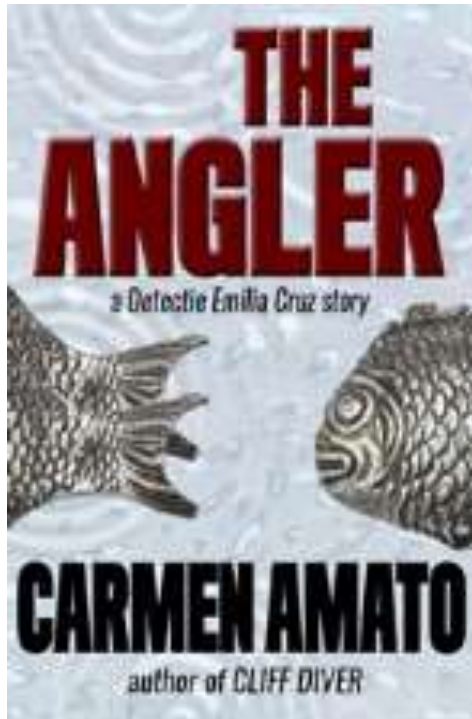
She was a pretty thing, looking like a recruiting poster in her dress uniform, but obviously the stories were true. The woman was a beast.

The photographer snapped away, recording the historic moment.

Fin

THE ANGLER: An Emilia Cruz Story

*This story is dedicated to the memory of
Father Richard Junius O.M.I, 1930-2007.*



The body was trussed like a chicken in an Acapulco *mercado*. It was nearly the same pinkish-gray color, too, except where the blood had drained downward and darkened the skin.

Detective Emilia Cruz Encinos took only swallow sips of the foul air as she squatted down to examine the body. The naked man lay on his right side with that arm extended and the fingers loosely curled. The left hand was behind him, bound to ankles tied together with a telephone cord. The pose caused the back to bow and the stomach to protrude slightly. He'd been old, with an old man's thickening waist and thinning hair but he still had muscle tone, as if active on a daily basis.

More telephone cord was wrapped around the neck but he hadn't been strangled. The eyes were closed and wrinkles wreathed the corners. The mouth was partially open, but not twisted in pain, although it was clear that he'd vomited before death.

Belatedly, Emilia realized that he was a *gringo*.

She stood and backed away as two crime scene technicians in coveralls and latex gloves pushed past. The bedroom was small, with little in it besides a twin bed with a spotless white coverlet, a rickety chair that served as a bedside table, and an old wooden wardrobe with two narrow doors. The body was pressed between the wall and the foot of the bed.

Wearing her own pair of latex gloves, Emilia opened the wardrobe. There wasn't much; a few pairs of pants, a lightweight jacket, some shirts, two black cotton dickeys with Roman collars.

"Medical examiner can confirm," the senior tech said. "But I'll bet the old guy had a heart attack and croaked before they got down to business."

"Have some respect," Emilia snapped. She shut the wardrobe door. "He was a priest."

"Couldn't tell from what he liked to read." The tech laughed as he snapped pictures of the body.

"Shut up." Emilia's partner Rico Portillo tried to squeeze his ample bulk into the room but there was nowhere to go so he stayed by the door.

"Hey, Portillo," the tech greeted him affably. "Check out the reading material for those lonely nights at home. Oh wait, I forgot. You got Cruz for that."

Emilia ignored the jibe; she and Rico constantly got *estupido* comments. The Acapulco municipal police were still coming to grips with the concept of a female detective.

"Make sure you dust all that shit for fingerprints," Rico said.

Next to the dead priest's knees, a pile of porn magazines screamed lewd headlines. One was open to the centerfold of a husky blonde woman with breasts the size of watermelons. The priest's outstretched right hand rested on top of it. Emilia wondered if he'd tried to pick it up or push it away. There was neither tape nor telephone cord marks on that hand, as if it had been left unbound on purpose.

Emilia edged past the wardrobe to the door. Rico led her out of the rectory and into the adjacent church. Acapulco's Church of the Holy Family wasn't large, but an arched *boveda* ceiling made of white brick made it seem larger than it was. Emilia had been there before and loved the stained glass windows and the side chapel known for a statue of Mary with a real cloth gown covered with silver charms called *milagros*. People pinned them to the statue as offerings for a special intention with which they needed help; a tiny silver heart to cure the heartbroken, a foot to heal an injury there, a dove to bring peace. The word *milagro* meant miracle and Emilia wondered if people really thought a silver charm had such power. More likely a *milagro*, like lighting a candle, was simply a way to give form to a prayer for hope and strength.

The two detectives sank into the front pew. Emilia's eyes watered as she breathed in the acrid smell of fire and ashy water. It was only marginally better than the fetid stink of death.

"A silver candlestick is missing from the sacristy," Rico said. "Curtains burned up and the dresser where they kept candles and vestments looks pretty ruined. Otherwise, just minimal smoke damage."

"We went through the entire rectory," Emilia said. "The housekeeper said nothing is missing."

"Good news," Rico replied. "Under the circumstances."

Emilia stripped off her latex gloves and dug out her notebook to begin documenting the timeline. Vandals had broken into the sacristy of the Church of the Holy Family last night around midnight. They'd started a fire, the *bomberos* had responded, and the crisis was over in about two hours. There had been no further excitement related to the church until 7:00 am when the housekeeper discovered the pastor's bound body in the rectory.

She scribbled down all the times, then looked up. "You think while everybody was running around with the fire, someone came in and killed the priest?" Emilia asked.

"Fire was a diversion, if you ask me," Rico said. He shifted uncomfortably in the narrow pew. "Took the candlestick to make it look like a robbery."

"What about the magazines?"

"Both the other priest and the housekeeper insist the magazines aren't his."

"You think he had enemies?" Emilia asked.

"Priests hear confessions," Rico said. "Maybe he heard something no one should have heard."

Emilia sighed, knowing what he meant. The Catholic clergy were often caught in the middle of Mexico's drug war, hearing things in the confessional booth that rivals would kill—and did—to know. But twenty minutes later, as Emilia sat in the rectory's dining room, she knew that Father Charles Sullivan, known to all as Padre Carlito, had in all likelihood signed his own death warrant.

"He was a good man." Luisa, the housekeeper, had short permed hair, a floral apron, and reddened eyes. She'd worked at the Church of the Holy Family for more than 20 years. Padre Carlito had been there for only 18 months. Originally from the Chicago area, he'd been an Oblate missionary priest in Mexico for more than 35 years, mostly in Mexico's barren and cartel-ravaged northern states. His assignment to the bright and modern church in Acapulco was a reward for years of privation and dedication to his faith. "He only wanted simple things," Luisa went on. "No fancy food. No new clothes or linens for the church."

"Did people here welcome him?"

Luisa nodded fiercely and wiped her eyes on the hem of her apron. “Everyone loved him. But look what they did to him. Those magazines. Que *basura!* Those jackals.”

“What jackals?”

“The jackals at the bar.” Luisa wiped her eyes again. “Padre Carlito scolded them.”

“Padre Carlito had an argument with someone at a bar?”

Luisa lifted her hands then let them fall into her lap in despair. “I told him. Padre Carlito, don’t make a fuss. Find another way. Maybe in the villages where he was before, everyone listens to the priest. But here, in the big city, it’s different.”

“Who did he argue with?” Emilia retrieved her notebook from her shoulder bag.

“Padre Carlito went to the bar called Don Sol last week,” Luisa explained tearfully. “He said they were giving beer to children and he told them to stop. But they didn’t have any respect. The jackals just laughed at him, in front of everyone.”

“How did Padre Carlito know this bar was selling drinks to kids?”

“Padre Carlito walked all over,” Luisa said. “Said he wanted to know the neighborhood.”

“But if the people at the bar sent Padre Carlito away, why would they hurt him now?” Emilia asked.

“Padre Carlito was so angry that he scolded the owners of Don Sol on Sunday in his sermon. He asked everyone in the church not to go there any more. He said they had to close it down. For the sake of the children.”

“*Madre de Dios,*” Emilia murmured. She didn’t know if she was swearing or praying.



The Don Sol was about two blocks away from the Church of the Holy Family, on a quiet, palm-lined street in the Colonia Progreso neighborhood on the western side of Acapulco bay. It was too far from the hi-rise hotels and condos ringing the water to cater to tourists, yet there were a few *gringos* sprinkled in with the locals; surfers who stayed in the neighborhood’s guesthouses in between waves or those who lived in Acapulco full-time but could only afford housing without an ocean view. But the majority of the early evening patrons were local. They were like Emilia and Rico; dressed casually in clothes that said they had jobs and cars and didn’t mind paying a few pesos more for imported beer or a better brand of tequila.

There were two pool tables in the back where a chalkboard proclaimed tournament winners and ceiling fans kept the air circulating. The bar in front was long, with two televisions mounted high above. Both were tuned to sports stations with the sound off so as not to compete with the pop tunes coming out of hidden speakers or the clack of pool cues and balls. The chairs and tables were light-colored wood in the traditional rustic style and carved suns smiled across the back of each chair.

Emilia couldn’t help but like the place. If the situation had been different, she would have felt comfortable sitting there with Rico, a cold beer bottle in her hand, her gun in an ankle holster under the hem of her jeans. She liked the big mural of a Spanish don with a smiling sun for a face that spread across the wall opposite the bar, liked the way the motif was repeated on the beer coasters and the server’s tray. The bartender was a muscular guy with a white apron and a friendly demeanor.

“Decent place, this,” Rico said, looking around. “This should become our regular spot.”

“Sure,” Emilia said, playing along. Rico always liked it when an investigation gave him a chance to try out his acting skills.

They spent an hour sipping beer at a table and watching nothing of significance. Emilia felt discouraged and was about to suggest that they leave, when the bartender rapped on the bar, gestured for quiet, and aimed a remote at one of the televisions. The music faded and the television volume came up. The screen changed to a local news channel. Emilia checked her watch. It was the top of the hour.

Most of the patrons in the bar ignored the television and went on with their drinking and talking. The pool games continued. More people came in; Don Sol was a popular place.

But the bartender leaned back to watch. After stories about a possible garbage strike, a downtown bus accident, and a slight decline in tourism, the screen filled with a live shot of the mayor's press secretary standing at a podium decorated with the seal of the city; a hand holding stalks of wheat.

Emilia swallowed a gasp when the spokesman announced that following a fire at the Church of the Holy Family, Father Charles Sullivan had been found dead, apparently of a heart attack that occurred while the priest was engaged in sexual activity. The spokesman said that the pastor had apparently been alone when he succumbed. His years of missionary work on behalf of the people of Mexico were noted. The mayor's office offered condolences to family, parishioners, and the diocese.

The bartender laughed. Emilia half rose from her chair, hand clenched around the beer bottle. Rico kicked her under the table and she sank down.

The television switched back to a silent sports channel. The music again competed with the chatter of bar conversations. A server brought Rico another beer.

A boy about 12 years old came in, threaded his way around the tables, and went to the bar. The bartender leaned down to listen to the boy. Their conversation was brief. The boy went out. The bartender joked with customers, served a few more beers, and then sent a text on a cell phone.

"Hey, *chica*," Rico said to Emilia. "Don't you need another beer?"

"Order me another," Emilia said. "I'll be right back."

She got up and slowly strolled to the restroom. Out of the corner of her eye, Emilia saw the bartender scribble something on a bar napkin.

An hour later, the boy came back. This time the bartender gave him a bottle of beer wrapped in the napkin. The child disappeared again.

Emilia and Rico paid their bill and left the bar. They strolled around the block looking at the stores that were still open, like some married couple, while Rico talked nonsense for the benefit of anyone who might be interested in them. As she looked around, Emilia barely heard his patter about them having just moved into the neighborhood and how much he liked the Don Sol.

The kid was almost certainly a *halcone*--a lookout who brought the bartender information and got paid in beer. His natural habitat would be anywhere with shelter and shadow and a vantage point to watch . . . something.

"Thanks for not chucking your beer at the bartender after the news," Rico said when they finally returned to the car, several blocks away.

"He was expecting that announcement," Emilia said. "Wasn't he?"

"Looks like it," Rico admitted.

"But it was so premature." Emilia leaned against the car, still angry over the news report. "We've just started the investigation."

"Somebody needed to have Padre Carlito discredited." Rico got his keys out of his pocket. "And fast."

"This isn't just about serving beer to underage kids, is it?" Emilia asked.

“It never is,” Rico said.



The lab report from the murder scene at the Church of the Holy Family landed in Rico’s inbox at the end of the day. Emilia felt her blood pressure rise into the danger zone as she read it.

“Come on, *chica*,” Rico said. He dragged her out of the squadroom and out to one of their regular places by the beach at Playa Tlacopanocha on the western lip of the bay. Half a dozen tables topped with oilcloth, chairs painted cobalt blue, and fresh fish served with simple and traditional flavors. Across the road, a billboard exhorted Acapulco Go Green! It was one of dozens dotted around the city proclaiming Mayor Carlota Montoya Perez’s latest initiative.

But even Emilia’s favorite *ceviche de camarones*, with pickled shrimp and chunks of tangy mango and avocado, couldn’t lift her mood. “ ‘A full set of prints were found on three of the magazines from the scene of death,’ ” she quoted. “ ‘The fingerprints on all the magazines are the same. None are those of the deceased, Charles Sullivan. The prints do not match any database profiles.’ ”

“What did you do, memorize the report?” Rico asked.

“Burned onto my retinas,” Emilia said. She pronged a fat shrimp. “If Padre Carlito had died while rifling through porn, his prints would have been on the magazines.”

Small fishing boats anchored in the shallow waters beyond the sand bobbed gently as twilight darkened the beach. The setting sun flared magenta against the horizon, streaking the water with violent color.

People came from all over the world to see Acapulco’s sunsets but tonight Emilia saw none of it, just a bleeding sky and that stupid billboard. What did collecting newspapers and using fluorescent bulbs matter if people killed each other in churches?

“Any ideas what to do next?” Rico asked.

“I say we go shopping, then back to Don Sol,” Emilia suggested. “And this time we do shots of tequila at the bar.”

“Shopping and tequila?” Rico frowned even as he sawed at his mouth with a paper napkin. “Sounds like an interesting plan.”



Friday night and the bar was packed. Music pumped out of the speakers at a higher decibel level than before, the pool games were more raucous, and the servers were in constant motion holding up trays laden with bottles and glasses as they accommodated thirsty patrons.

Emilia had wanted a barstool at the end where it would be easiest to put her plan into motion but they ended up being stuck in the middle. Rico was on her right and a couple of hard drinkers were on her left.

“Tequila,” Rico boomed and slapped his hand on the bar. “Top shelf. We’re celebrating.”

“What’s the occasion?” the bartender asked.

“The mother-in-law is moving out,” Rico crowed.

Emilia suppressed a grin. Rico had loved her idea, probably more for the acting than the evidence they’d collect. He always lived in the moment while she fretted. This time she couldn’t help fretting about Padre Carlito’s housekeeper and his family in El Norte, all of whom must be

heart-broken by the lies being told about the manner of his death. Padre Carlito had been an honorable man, albeit a naïve one.

As she watched the bartender pour top-grade Patrón into the tall tequila shot glasses, Emilia wondered if she wasn't being naïve as well. She and Rico had no idea what they were up against here at Don Sol, except that it was important enough to kill a priest in his own church.

The bartender set a shot glass in front of Emilia and another in front of Rico. "Congratulations," he said to Rico.

"Woman's a fucking *bruja*," Rico said. He picked up his tequila and saluted the bartender. "Best day of my life when she said she was leaving."

"She's my mother," Emilia wailed. "You should have more respect."

"Here's to her broom and the trip back to hell." Rico knocked back his tequila.

"You *pendejo*!" Emilia exclaimed. She slid the base of her tequila glass between the knuckles of her first and middle fingers, so as not to mess the fingerprints the bartender had left, and jerked the tequila glass. The contents flew into Rico's face.

Roaring his anger, Rico feigned a grab at her. Emilia squealed as she swiftly poked the offending glass up the sleeve of her jean jacket. Rico's hand came down on the bar, holding an identical glass that they'd bought beforehand. The switch took less than a second.

"You think that's going to make a difference?" Rico shouted.

"You can sleep in a cold bed tonight, *pendejo*," Emilia shot back. She flounced off the barstool and tried not to laugh as she made her way to the door, the glass secure inside her sleeve, leaving her supposedly estranged husband bellowing for another shot of tequila.



"I knew it," Emilia gloated.

The bartender had left three nice fingerprints on the tequila glass. According to the tech report, they all matched the prints taken off the porn magazines found next to the dead priest.

"Be nice if we had a name to go with those prints," Rico said.

It was late. The squadroom was empty except for the two of them. Lt. Inocente was still in his office, however, as evidenced by the white rime of light showing under the closed door.

Emilia tipped her chair back, put her feet up on the desk, and studied her new black cross trainers. She liked having a job that kept her active, that let her wear jeans and tees every day. It would be hard to have a job that kept her inside, that didn't let her walk--.

"Here's a question," she said as her thoughts suddenly raced. "Why is the kid being paid in beer? The bartender is getting a real deal paying lookouts in beer."

"Depends on what the information is worth," Rico said. He opened his desk drawer and took out a bag of chips.

"Or maybe someone else is paying the kid." Emilia set her chair down with a thunk, realizing what they'd been missing. "No, wait. He's not a lookout, he's a courier. That's why we didn't see him on the street. A car picks him up or he reports to someone who's holed up not too far away."

"Okay, that tracks," Rico said as he inhaled a handful of chips.

"The beer isn't payment, it's proof." Emilia felt like she'd cracked a code. "He has to bring it back as proof he delivered the message."

"So basically, the kid runs messages for somebody important enough to kill for," Rico summarized. "Colonia Progreso hasn't seen a lot of cartel violence. Are we looking at somebody new in the drug business?"

“Maybe,” Emilia said thoughtfully. “I think that by killing Padre Carlito, the bartender was just a little fish doing a favor for a big fish.”

Rico waddled up the empty chip bag. “One big enough to know somebody in the mayor’s office.”

The door to Lt. Inocente’s office opened, the light switched off, and he walked into the squadroom. Emilia had worked for him for over a year and the fit man with an expensive haircut and trim moustache was still a mystery to her. He’d made it difficult for her to join the detective squadroom and there was still a patronizing tension in the air whenever he spoke to her.

“What are you two still doing here?” he asked. He wore a suit and a British raincoat and carried a leather briefcase.

“We were waiting for an additional fingerprint report on the Sullivan case, *teniente*,” Rico said.

“The dead priest?” Lt. Inocente put down his briefcase and made a give-it-to-me gesture.

Rico handed him the report. “Unidentified prints at the scene match those of a local bartender.”

Lt. Inocente skimmed the report then let it flutter onto Rico’s computer keyboard. “Weak. Circumstantial. Besides, you’ve got no motive.”

“Not entirely, *teniente*,” Rico said. “Padre Charles Sullivan accused the bartender’s place of selling alcohol to minors. Scolded him in the bar and from the pulpit at Sunday Mass.”

Lt. Inocente fingered his moustache. “You got any witnesses who can verify that the bar is selling to minors?”

“We saw one of the bartenders give a bottle of beer to a minor child,” Emilia said.

“Gave it or sold it? Open or unopened?” Lt. Inocente fired off the words as if annoyed that he had to ask.

“Gave the kid an unopened bottle,” Emilia replied.

“If we tried to arrest a man for that, we’d have to arrest half the fathers in Mexico.” Lt. Inocente picked up his briefcase and started for the squadroom door. “Everyone’s agreed that Sullivan had a heart attack while making himself happy with a little bondage. The death will be pronounced as misadventure.”

Rico stood up. “*Teniente*, I don’t think we can ignore the Don Sol angle. Cruz and I have reason to believe the kid is a courier. The bar is probably a distribution hub for someone higher up the food chain.”

Lt. Inocente stopped walking and stood still in the doorway. “Did you say the Don Sol?” he asked, his back to the detectives.

“Yes. The Don Sol in Colonia Progreso,” Rico said.

El teniente turned around, his expression blank. “Exactly what do you have on the Don Sol?”

“We’ve been there,” Rico said. “Saw the exchange between the bartender and a kid--.”

“Stake out the place,” Lt. Inocente interrupted. “Follow the kid, see where he goes. We’ll bring in Organized Crime so when you call in a location we’ll be ready. Let’s wrap it up fast, too, before they change their routine.” He looked from Rico to Emilia. “Can you two handle it?”

Emilia shot to her feet. “Will that let us arrest the bartender for the Sullivan murder?”

Lt. Inocente’s gaze drifted to a point just to the left of Emilia’s head. “Sometimes, Cruz, I think you might make a decent cop. Other times you don’t have the instincts of a cricket. Nobody’s telling the mayor’s office they were wrong.” He picked up his briefcase and left.

Emilia slammed herself back in her chair and logged off her computer, afraid of where her thoughts were going.

“Hey, *chica*.” Rico’s computer screen went dark, too. “Don’t let him get to you.”

“It’s not that.” But Emilia couldn’t bring herself to say what she was thinking.

Rico did instead. “*El teniente* didn’t give a shit until he found out the bar was the Don Sol. Gotta wonder why.”

Emilia took a deep breath. “You think he knows something we don’t?”

“I think there are a lot of fish in the sea,” Rico said carefully. “We might catch some at Don Sol but others will swim up to take their place.”

Emilia knew what he meant and it was all too easy to believe. “So we blow off the investigation?”

“Maybe we should. Say we followed up but couldn’t find out anything.” Rico’s round face looked sad and tired. “It’s not going to make a difference.”

“Yes, it will.” Emilia stood up. “We’re going to catch the fish that killed Padre Carlito.”



Rico hung out at the Don Sol, finding solace in tequila over his supposed bad marriage. Meanwhile, Emilia took to window shopping in the neighborhood and memorizing the cars in the street in back of the bar. One of them had to belong to the bartender. If nothing came of the kid and the stakeout, she’d hunt him down some other way.

On the third night she was in a stationary store, pretending to be interested in school notebooks, when her cell phone buzzed. It was Rico, calling from the bar, using a predetermined code to tell her which direction the kid had gone after leaving the Don Sol. Emilia shot out of the store and down the street in time to see the kid, holding his napkin-wrapped beer bottle, climb into the back of a black SUV.

It sped off, leaving Emilia with just the last three digits of the *placa* number.

Six nights later, the kid was picked up again by the same car. This time Emilia caught the entire license plate number. When they ran it through the system, she finally felt like they were getting somewhere.

“The car belongs to a Pedro Gonzalez Zambrano,” Rico said, reading from his computer screen. “He owns Zambrano Recycling. Car registration has a corporate address.”

“Recycling,” Emilia murmured, remembering the Go Green! campaign billboards. “There’s the connection to the mayor’s office.”

“Do we tell *el teniente*?”

“Not yet,” Emilia said.

The stakeout shifted to Rico’s car, parked along the street where the kid had been picked up before.

Two nights into their vigil, the kid came out of the bar, the black SUV cruised up beside him, the kid climbed in with his beer bottle, and the car pulled into traffic again. Rico let another car go by before he followed.

The SUV didn’t make any abrupt turns or otherwise indicate the driver knew he was being followed as they drove north along the wide Adolfo Cortines highway, winding up on the streets of the Colonia Hidalgo neighborhood. When the SUV turned into a warehouse area, Rico hung back. They watched the tail lights turn into a dark parking lot.

“This matches the Zambrano Recycling address,” Rico said. “You want to call it in?”

“Not yet,” Emilia said. “Let’s take a look first.”

Rico killed their lights and rolled the car past a deserted guard shack. The warehouses were plain cement rectangles with corrugated metal roofs and wide roll-up bay doors for loading and

unloading cargo, clustered in a U shape around the lot. There were no windows. The SUV was parked at the far end, lights off and empty.

They continued a block, turned around and parked in front of a row of shops with the car facing the road. Anyone driving north to the warehouse cluster would pass them.

“We should call it in,” Rico said after half an hour.

“Not yet,” Emilia said.

Rico huffed out his breath and tried to get comfortable. After 20 minutes during which only a trash truck and a taxi went by, he cleared his throat. “You’re never going to recognize anybody in a car from this distance.”

“I’ll recognize the car,” Emilia said.

Two hours passed before a minivan with the distinctive Don Sol artwork plastered across the side rumbled by heading north.

“This suddenly got too easy,” Rico exclaimed.

“Call it in,” Emilia said.



“I wanted to let you know,” Emilia said to Luisa. “Padre Carlito was right about that bar. But he didn’t know the whole story.”

The housekeeper listened quietly as Emilia told her about the fingerprints on the tequila glass, the kid who was acting as a courier, the late night raid on the warehouse, and the arrest of six men who’d been trafficking cocaine using the warehouse in Colonia Hidalgo to repackaging the stuff and the Don Sol as a distribution point. Shadows lengthened across the rectory’s dining table as she talked. The coffee that the housekeeper had poured into colorful *talavera* cups grew cold.

Luisa wiped her eyes on the hem of her apron. “So the man who murdered Padre Carlito got arrested?” she asked. “He’s in jail for a good long time?”

“He’s in jail,” Emilia said. “But not for murder.”

“But you just said . . .” Luisa trailed off in confusion.

“We didn’t have enough hard evidence to arrest him for murder. But he’ll be in jail for a long time for drug smuggling.” Emilia added sugar to her cold coffee and stirred, suddenly finding it hard to meet the housekeeper’s reddened eyes. “I’m sorry that we couldn’t set the record straight about how Padre Carlito died.”

Luisa shrugged. “You tried. That’s more than what we expected from the police.”

“I want you to tell everyone the truth,” Emilia said. She dug into her shoulder bag for a pile of business cards printed with just her first name and cell phone number. “Please give these to as many people here at the Church of the Holy Family as you can. Tell them to call me if there’s ever anything odd going on in the neighborhood. If they see things they think aren’t right.”

The housekeeper gave Emilia a damp smile and gathered the cards into a tidy stack. “You’re a good woman, Detective,” she said.

Instead of walking out the rectory door, Emilia went into the church. The white brick and dark wood pews gleamed. Dust motes tumbled in the shafts of setting sunlight that streamed through the colored glass of the long windows.

She crossed to the chapel of Mary. The statue’s face was serene above the gown encrusted with silver *milagros*. Emilia took out the one she’d brought.

It was a silver fish, with tiny fins and tail. Emilia pinned the *milagro* to Mary’s dress and folded the cloth so that the day’s last light fell on the charm.

“Help me, Mary,” Emilia whispered. “Help me catch all the fish in the sea.”

Fin

For further information about Father Richard Junius and the true events which inspired this story, please see:

[Oblate Communications, October 2007](#), Latin America section

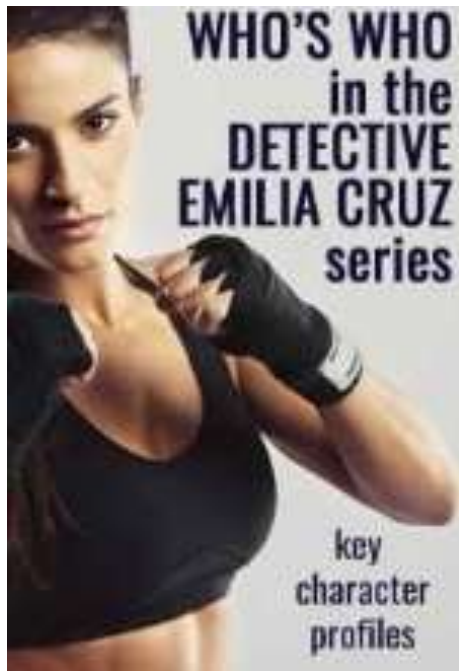
[“Condemnation for slanted media coverage of American priest's murder in Mexico,”](#) Catholic News Agency, 7 Aug 2007

[“The Sacristy of Santa Clara,”](#) carmenamato.net, 3 May 2012

Who's Who in the Detective Emilia Cruz series

The characters in the Emilia Cruz mystery series are complex and true-to-life.

Emilia Cruz, the first and only female detective on the Acapulco police force, is the leading lady in the series. She is joined by a cast you'll cheer for, wonder at, love to hate, and so much more.



Emilia Cruz Encinos: Emilia grew up dirt poor in Acapulco, a street urchin who sold candy by the side of a highway in order to pay her school fees. She followed her two male cousins into the police department and by a combination of native smarts and raw determination made it to the top of the heap—the detective squadroom. No one wanted her there but Emilia isn't afraid to defend herself and get what she's rightfully earned. It helps that she's a good liar, a fast thinker, and a mean kickboxer. On her own time, she looks for women who have gone missing amid Mexico's drug violence; she calls them Las Perdidas—the Lost Ones. Between her job as a cop, her hunt for the missing, and caring for her child-like mother, Emilia's been too busy for a committed relationship. Now it seems like a bridge too far.

Kurt Rucker: A native of New York who grew up on a farm, Kurt is a quietly confident man who enlisted in the US Marine Corps, went to war, and then to college where he “studied hotel and restaurant management so I'd never have to go back to that farm.” He manages the Palacio Réal, Acapulco's most luxurious hotel, serves on the prestigious Acapulco Hotel Association board, and speaks fluent Spanish. Kurt moves easily in any environment, from Emilia's uncle's garage in a poor neighborhood to the mayor's boardroom. A competitive triathlete, he is very different from any other man Emilia has met and she knows he can teach her the leadership skills she lacks. Kurt cares deeply about Emilia but he's no pushover; when her emotional distance and tendency to hide the truth hurts their relationship, he lets her know.

Victor Obregon Sosa: The head of the police union in the state of Guerrero, Obregon rules police resources in Acapulco and the rest of the state with an iron hand. He likes power and likes to show that he has it. Dark good looks, obvious muscle, and black clothing are all part of the Obregon brand. Sex with him is always on offer. Emilia knows it would be wild, brief, and imminently regrettable.

Franco Silvio: Acapulco's senior detective is a former heavyweight boxer with hooded eyes, a perpetual scowl, and a gray crew cut. He runs a gambling ring on the side in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. His partner was killed a few years ago and Silvio was briefly suspended after a clumsy inquiry. Rumors still circulate and are easy to believe. Silvio inspires fear and Emilia

isn't totally immune. He believes that women can't cut it as detectives and have no place in the squadroom, making him Emilia's most powerful enemy. Until he becomes her partner.

Ricardo Portillo: Emilia's first partner is a good-natured, portly detective who was the only one who volunteered to take her on as a partner when Emilia made detective. He is protective toward her and resentful when she doesn't seem to need him. Twice divorced, his natural humor always reasserts itself and Emilia knows he is a decent man at heart. His humor also comes in handy as a device to balance his partnership with Emilia with the animosity of fellow detectives who don't want a woman joining their ranks. Rico and Emilia are teamed in all the prequel short stories and the first full novel, *CLIFF DIVER*.

Carlota Montoya Perez: Acapulco's mayor is beautiful, ambitious, and controlling. She is the most exciting politician in the state of Guerrero. Carlota is determined to revive tourism in Acapulco and make it a major world conference center. To that end she'll gloss over anything she thinks will make the city look bad. Oh, and she wants Acapulco to host a summer Olympics. Her relationship with Obregon is a bit of a mystery but likely one of mutual manipulation.

Sophia Encinos: Emilia's mother suffered a breakdown when Emilia's father died years ago and never recovered. To her, Emilia is still a school girl and her father may come home at any moment. Sophia's vagueness means that Emilia has had to be the parent and decision maker. But now and then, Sophia can still teach her daughter a lesson.

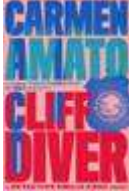
Acapulco: The Pacific coast city of Acapulco has long been associated with glamor, cliff divers, and spring break. But in recent years the stunning city has become a prize to be fought over by drug cartels, resulting in the city having the highest homicide rate in Mexico and the police accused of collusion with organized crime. For Emilia Cruz, there's the Acapulco that tourists know: luxury hi-rises, candlelit nights on the beach, the sweep of the most beautiful bay in the world, the majesty of the clear blue Pacific. There's also the Acapulco that home to hookers and thieves, the streets where life is cheap and poverty is as pervasive as the wind off the ocean. Both of these versions of Acapulco claw at each other and force Emilia to survive between them.

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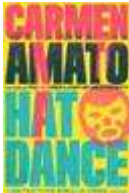
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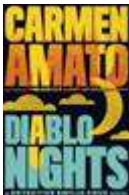
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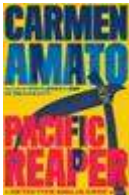
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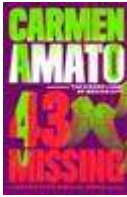
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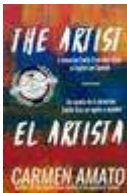
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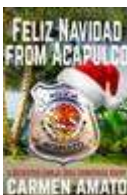
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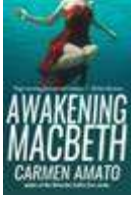


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