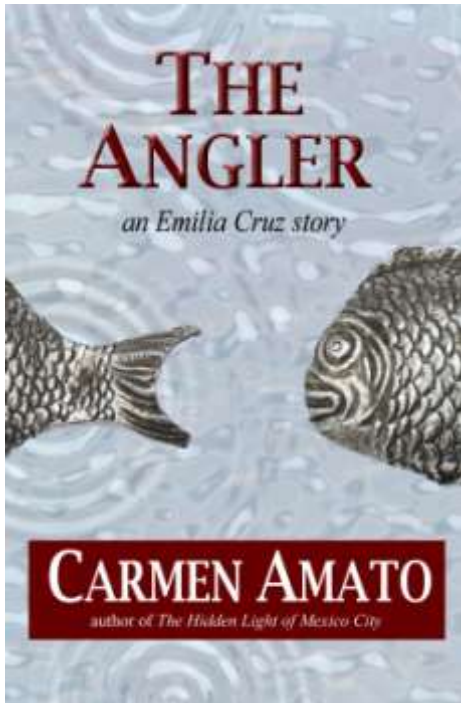


THE ANGLER: An Emilia Cruz Story

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 comments like that. 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 his rectory bedroom.

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 rival

cartelistas 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 to not 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 its ankle holster hidden by 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 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. Without smirking, 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."

The bartender had put down his cell phone on the counter behind the bar. From her seat at the table Emilia could no longer see what he was doing. She got up and slowly

strolled to the restroom. Out of the corner of her eye, Emilia saw the bartender copy something from the phone onto 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 cruised 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. Emilia barely heard his patter about them having just moved into the neighborhood and how much he liked the Don Sol as she looked around. The kid was almost certainly a *halcones*--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 to *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 as the mayor's office claimed, 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."



It was a 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 home.

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.

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