



## 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.



## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

