

Prologue

Lisa Kerry lay on the roof of an abandoned factory and watched the curving bridge through the scope of her sniper rifle. The fading daylight worried her. The Gray Man still did the night shifts. He hadn't changed his ways.

She waited and scanned the cars for his old silver Ford. The day had come. She'd fantasized about it for years; the scenarios ever changing, the outcome always the same: the Gray Man taking his last breath.

The monotony of commuter traffic affected her alertness, but her aching elbows and hipbones kept her focused. Through the sights she scrutinized every silver car. Watching out for prying eyes, she let her gaze sweep over the tiny shoe box houses of the favelas surrounding her and the decrepit factories and storage halls before she returned to the inspection of a never ending procession of cars, buses and trucks.

There was a Ford. The number plate matched. Lisa tensed, shifted position. Reflections dancing over the windshield only allowed her to make out the silhouette of a

human being. Except he hardly fit the definition of human. Lisa aimed. Only the one chance. Keeping the right front tire in the crosshairs of the scope, she waited for the car to enter the curve. Now. Lisa pulled the trigger. The tire burst. The vehicle swerved, went off the bridge and dropped thirty meters, hitting the rocky ground engine first.

Even though it was unlikely, Lisa searched for a sign of life. His head rested on the steering wheel. Of course the macho didn't wear a seatbelt. Was he unconscious or dead? A flame licked the side of the car.

She pointed the scope at the driver again. When the fire reached his body, he still didn't move. She closed her eyes and lowered the weapon. Watching from afar, she felt joy, relief, satisfaction. The Gray Man was dead. Little girls could sleep untroubled in their cells. If only she could tell them they'd be safe tonight. Lisa smelled the rancid odor of greasy hair and unwashed bodies huddled together in a futile attempt to protect each other.

Cars stopped, people clambered out to see what had happened. A woman pulled out a cell phone. Two men, one carrying a small fire extinguisher, stumbled down the slope towards the burning car. Lisa lifted the rifle and checked on the blackening figure in the driver's seat. His face blistered, hair singed, the Gray Man was beyond help.

Time to leave, time to forget him. Lisa collected the spent shell, the sandbag and her bottle of water. Better not to leave evidence, even though it was unlikely anyone would come looking. Accidents happened. People died.

Particularly in Rio de Janeiro.

1

Luiz strolled along Copacabana beach leaving prints in the wet sand. The breaking waves splashed his bare feet. Despite the haze he could make out container ships on the horizon. Ahead, the white walls of the old fort loomed; to his right, high rises blocked the view of Cristo Redentor, the famous statue found on many post cards.

He loved the beaches of Rio's zona sul. Young men played volleyball, kids built sand sculptures, street vendors sold sunscreen, peanuts, cold beverages or beach towels. People lay scattered enjoying the sun, the easy rhythm of the city. The blue half-pipe shapes of the policia militar tents put them at ease, while Luiz kept a watchful eye on the cops.

He carried a soccer ball squeezed between his left arm and hip. Maybe later he'd round up the gang and they'd actually play. With falling dusk, the beach emptied. Soon they wouldn't be able to pick up more money anyway. A lobster-tanned guy had taken off his watch – to make sure his skin got evenly singed – and put it beside him in the sand. Luiz picked it up with his toes.

Tatu and Rena walked parallel to him, closer to the street and the snack bars lining the beach. Tatu beat his drum and Rena sang love songs for the tourists and locals sitting at the tables.

Luiz had given up begging when people got too reluctant to pull out their wallets in front of a black, fourteen-year-old street kid. And right they were. Now he'd run with it, no longer content with a few morsels of charity.

“Stop! Thief! Stop him!”

Luiz jerked around. Gordinho, clutching a duffel bag, came running towards him, closely followed by a fit-looking guy in his twenties. Merda. Tatu watched from across the beach, fully alert. Luiz dropped the ball and kicked it, hitting the angry pursuer in the temple. A perfect shot. The guy screamed and looked around. Luiz ran to him. “Sorry, man. Hope I didn't break your nose.”

“Get out of my way.” He pushed Luiz back.

Luiz fell and tripped the playboy. Jumping to his feet, he towered over him. “Hey, man, why the hell did you do that?”

Tatu came strutting towards them, holding the ball in his hands. “Problems, Luiz?”

“Sorry guys, but the brat stole my stuff,” the playboy mumbled.

Luiz held out a hand and pulled him to his feet. “Where? Maybe we can still get him.” As expected, Gordinho had disappeared.

The guy craned his neck. “Can't see him.”

Luiz shrugged. “Anything valuable?”

“My new camera and some money.”

“That's a shame,” Luiz said, trying to ignore Tatu's smirk.

They met at the old Forte do Copacabana, where the fishermen had already packed up their stalls. Gordinho rummaged through the duffel bag.

“Idiot,” Luiz growled. “That guy would have caught you if I hadn't stopped him. He looked like a fucking marathon runner.”

Rena giggled. Yeah, she'd never do something stupid like that. “What did I teach you about grab and runs?”

The boy sighed. “Steal from people who won't be able to catch up with me.”

“Exactly. And you were supposed to cover me, not the other way round.”

Gordinho hung his head.

“So, what do we have?” Luiz asked and turned the bag inside out. There was the small Sony camera, a book, a T-shirt, sneakers and a small plastic wallet. Luiz picked it up. “Twenty Reais. We can sell the camera and sneakers.”

Rena pulled some bills from the pocket of her shorts. “We got eighteen Reais.”

“Cool, plenty of money for dinner.”

“And you?” Gordinho asked in a challenging tone.

Luiz grinned and fumbled for the watch, a Casio with a solar panel. No cheap shit.

“That's all?”

Tatu kicked Gordinho's shin. “Fag.”

Gordinho jumped up and tried to hit him in the face. Tatu dodged the fist, grabbed Gordinho's arm, but failed to twist it behind his back. Gordinho wrapped his free arm around Tatu's neck. They fell and rolled in the sand. Luiz watched. Gordinho was a good fighter. A year younger than Tatu, he was just as tall, but broad and chubby. He'd still bet on Tatu, though.

“That's enough,” Rena shouted. “Can't believe how stupid boys are.”

Tatu pinned Gordinho down but the boy didn't give up. Rena struggled to her feet and kicked Tatu in the side. He rolled off and held out a cigarette for Gordinho.

“That wasn't all.” Luiz pulled out a wallet and opened it. “Looks like more than a hundred.”

“Wow!” Rena exclaimed.

“Where did you pick that one?” Gordinho asked.

“At the MacDonald's stall. Always a good place to find tourists and no fucking Olympic sprinters. Anyone hungry?”

They bought three family-size pizzas and ate them sitting on the stone steps leading down to the beach.

“Can we sleep here?” Rena asked. “I love hearing the surf at night.”

Luiz hated to sleep on the beach. “It'll be noisy at night, with all the tourists, hookers and drug dealers around the bars.”

Luiz looked at the others. Gordinho shrugged. Tatu grinned. “All right, princess, we'll see how it goes. If it gets too loud, we can always go somewhere else.” He didn't

care about noise, but worried about drunks trying to have some fun roughing up street kids.

Wearing shorts and t-shirts they splashed around in the water, rinsing off the sweat and dust of the city before they settled underneath a group of palm trees where they'd be somewhat sheltered. Luiz stretched out. The sound of the waves breaking against the beach lulled him. Much better than the rumbling of trains, the screeching of brakes and the rattle of iron on iron. He drifted off.

Screams jerked Luiz awake. Alerted, he jumped to his feet. The kids were all there, sound asleep except for Tatu who rolled over and muttered something. From the bars he heard the usual noise of music, yelling and drunken arguments. The digital clock on the building across the street said it was only one o'clock.

Luiz strolled towards the street. At a far corner, he saw a group of tourists arguing over the price of marijuana with a traficante. Another crowd spilled out of a bar and moved on towards the next. Two prostitutes offered their services. Before Luiz could see if the guys asked them along, his attention was drawn to a hunched figure and a young boy disappearing down the stairs to the public toilets.

Luiz decided he urgently needed to take a leak. It took him a minute or two to reach the entrance. The stench of piss made him recoil even before he stepped through the door.

A whimper from one of the stalls confirmed his suspicion. His heart pumped in his throat. He broke out in a sweat. Luiz thrust his shoulder against the only closed door. It resisted.

A man's voice snarled, "Fuck off!"

Luiz stepped back and kicked the door in, pushing the occupants against the toilet and wall. The man groaned and gaped at him over his shoulder, his pants around his ankles, clutching a crying black boy. Luiz grabbed the man by the neck of his shirt and yanked him out of the stall. The guy stumbled and fell in front of the wash basins, swearing. Luiz kicked him in the stomach and considered giving the bastard the beating of his life. Though he was much taller and broader than Luiz, he was already down. Instead Luiz squatted in front of the boy who'd just pulled up his shorts. He knew better than to touch him. "Hey, it's okay. He'll leave you alone. It'll stop hurting."

The sobs erupted in longer intervals.

"I should fuck both of you," the man yelled. Luiz guessed he felt a lot braver now that he was back in his pants. Fully alert, he listened to his footsteps coming closer. The boy stared past Luiz, his eyes wide with fear. Luiz rose and hit the man in the face with his elbow. He could feel and hear the crunch when his arm connected with the man's nose, followed by a roar of pain. He pushed him against the wall, patted him down and took all the money from his wallet before he shoved it back in his pocket. Satisfied, Luiz smiled and crouched again. Behind him, he heard the man shuffle away, mumbling into his hands.

"You got any friends here?" Luiz asked.

The boy sniffed and shook his head.

"You want to stay with us? We're a pretty cool gang."

For the first time, he looked up at Luiz, his eyes still filled with tears. He nodded.

“Okay, good. I'm Luiz. What's your name?”

“Ubaldo,” he mumbled.

“Let's go.”

Ubaldo trailed after Luiz. “He said he would give me money.”

“Maybe he would have but you didn't sound like it was worth it.”

The boy sobbed again. “No. It hurt so much. I begged him, but he wouldn't stop.”

“I know. Try to forget it.” Luiz slapped the bills in his hand. “Here, it's yours.”

Ubaldo stared at them. “Eighty Reais?”

“If you want, I can keep it for you.”

Ubaldo handed back sixty. Luiz smiled. They walked back to the copse of palm trees. Tatu stood there and waved. He must have woken and found Luiz gone.

“Thought you might bring back something.” Tatu grinned. “Hi kiddo.”

“This is Ubaldo. He'll stay with us, at least for a while.”

“Cool.” Tatu slapped Ubaldo on the back. The boy flinched.

“Easy,” Luiz said.

2

Lisa stepped out of the run-down apartment building in Copacabana and let the latch fall into the lock. She opened the gate and walked down the street. Like every morning she detoured to the coffee shop on the corner. “Bom dia, Sandro.”

“Olá Lisa. The usual?”

Lisa smiled and nodded. “Of course.” She watched the young mulatto handle the espresso machine, steam the milk and fill a paper cup with cafe latte.

“Obrigada,” she thanked him and took the coffee. Her gaze swept up the hill and the favela hugging it. The shantytowns kept growing. More of the wooden shacks had been replaced with small brick houses over the years. Built on top of each other they cascaded down the slope. White satellite dishes reflected the morning light on many rooftops.

Still, they formed a harsh contrast to fashionable Copacabana. Here, small shops and restaurants lined the streets. Every morning people swept the crooked sidewalks. The roots of large trees slanted the pavement slabs, fighting for more space. A wooden cage

hung from a thick branch, entrapping a bird, its song reserved for those walking under the tree.

A man in a white lab coat chased away street kids. Drowsy and frozen looking, they shuffled away. Lisa took a sip of her coffee. The boy was nowhere to be seen. A loner, he'd slept in the doorway of her bookstore for the last two weeks or so. She pulled the key from her jeans pocket and unlocked the door. The familiar smell of old books, ancient carpet and dust welcomed her. The front room was stuffed with shelves overflowing with books. Space was limited here as well. She put her shoulder bag down on a chair behind the counter and went to the back room where she kept the cash locked in a safe overnight. On her way back, she heard the jingle of the door bells and saw the boy enter, followed by four more kids, the oldest of them maybe fourteen. A dangerous age.

“Oi, Ubaldo. Everything okay?” He looked nervous or embarrassed, his eyes darting around. Lisa set the cash box down on the counter and put her hand on her hip, close to the holstered gun hidden under her wide shirt. Something was definitely wrong.

“Tudo bem, Lisa. They are friends. They wanted to see where I work.”

The tallest boy looked around at the other kids. Lisa's fingers slipped over the pistol. He shrugged then smiled. “Ubaldo really works for you?”

Lisa relaxed her grip and nodded. “Yeah, why not? Earns him a meal a day.”

A pretty boy with chocolate-colored skin laughed and slapped the taller one on the back. “Hey, Luiz, we'll call him professor.”

The others smirked or giggled, while Ubaldo looked at his feet.

She decided to rescue him. “All right, we've got work to do. What about you guys?”

The boy called Luiz snorted. “No Senhora, we lead a life of leisure.”

Lisa laughed and dropped her hand. They were probably harmless enough. “Too bad. I could use some help clearing out the backyard. It's full of junk. You could sell some of it.”

He tilted his head, as if he still had to decide whether to trust her. “Show us.”

Lisa led them through the back room out to the yard, where the collected remnants of previous tenants lay abandoned. She had no clue why she wanted to get rid of it now, but her doubts vanished when she looked into the kids' awed faces while they scanned her treasures. “Tell me your names,” she said.

“I'm Luiz and this is Tatu.” He pointed his thumb to the cute boy.

She couldn't help smiling. “Tatu?”

“Yeah,” Tatu said, “Cause I'm tough like an armadillo.”

Luiz slapped a chubby boy on the back. “Gordinho.” He bowed to a pretty girl. “And princess Rena.”

The boys smiled, but Rena scowled at Luiz. She reminded Lisa a lot of her younger self – before things started to go seriously wrong. “I'm Lisa. So, you want the job?”

Luiz grinned. “How much?”

Lisa scratched her head and looked at the collection. A toilet seat, an old mattress, lumps of old clothes, some boards that might have been a shelf once, a broken plant pot

and more debris of other people's lives. Between the five of them, it should be cleaned up in two hours, she guessed. “Ten Reais for each of you. And you can keep or sell whatever you want.”

Luiz's grin broadened. “Deal.”

Lisa nodded and strolled back into the store. Ubaldo followed her. “What do you want me to do?”

She picked up her coffee cup, but it felt cold already. “Why don't you make us some coffee. Have you eaten anything?”

Ubaldo shook his head before he jumped to his first task.

Lisa pulled a twenty Reais bill from the back pocket of her jeans and put it on the counter. “Get us some bread and cheese. Enough for everyone.”

She smiled at Ubaldo's baffled face, but realized she might never get rid of the lot if she started feeding them. Like cats, they'd just keep coming back for more.

While she sorted the coins and bills into the cash register, Ubaldo switched on the coffee maker, grabbed the money and set out.

In the meantime, she dusted off the guidebooks in the window. The street had come alive with people on their way to work. The tourists were still recovering from last night's party, but around ten o'clock business would pick up. She saw Ubaldo running across the street, his arms wrapped around paper bags. Lisa opened the door for him.

“That was quick.”

“I'm hungry!”

Lisa ruffled his greasy hair. “Take the food outside and eat with your friends.” She followed him to the back door and saw Luiz and Tatu collect pieces of metal.

Ubaldo yelled, “Food!”

“Huh? For us?” Luiz stared at him, but Tatu sprinted across the yard, chased by the others. They sat in a circle on the concrete floor and dug in.

“Is she a bit crazy?” Tatu asked.

Lisa stepped back, smiling to herself. The bells at the front door jingled.

While Lisa did her best to keep three customers happy at the same time, she prayed Rejane, her shop assistant, would recover quickly from the flu. One woman finally decided which Paulo Coelho novel she wanted to buy and her friend settled for *The House of Spirits*. Lisa moved on to the guy lurking in the used books section. Definitely a foreigner. Hawaiian shirt, orange shorts and Ray-Ban sunglasses. She addressed him in English. “Can I help you, sir?”

He turned and flashed her a wide smile. “I hope so. You do city tours?”

“Yes, but I’m a bit short on staff at the moment.”

He grinned. “Sorry, already got a job.”

Lisa laughed. “Too bad. I’m desperate enough to hire you.”

He tilted his head. “You sound American.”

“I spent some time in the U.S.”

“Where?”

The door bells jingled once again. Suppressing a sigh, Lisa looked over her shoulder. Two young women filed in and stood waiting for assistance. “Sorry, no time for small talk. For how long are you here?”

His cell phone rang. “Sorry.” The muscles in his jaws twitched as he looked at the display. “Might take a while.”

Lisa focused her attention on the newcomers. While she showed them several Rio guidebooks and explained the strengths of each, she noticed the American leaving with a last glance at her, cell phone still pressed against his ear.

Around noon the shop emptied and Lisa collapsed on a chair when Luiz walked in from the back. “We're done.”

“Let's take a look then.” Lisa followed him outside.

They had cleared the yard. A wooden pushcart stood loaded with scrap metal. A bike with two front wheels and a huge metal basket between them spilled over with rags. Ubaldo stood by as if he were afraid they'd leave him behind. She hoped they treated him well. The boy had grown on her.

Lisa pulled a wad of bills out of her back pocket and counted out five ten-Reais notes. Luiz took them and pointed at the old workshop. “That yours?”

She shrugged. “I guess so. Why?”

He looked at her for several seconds then shook his head. “Just curious.”