

# **Strays of Rio**

**by Edith Parzefall**

## **Prologue**

Lisa Kerry lay on the roof of an abandoned factory and watched the curved bridge through the scope of her sniper rifle. Only the fading daylight worried her. No choice though. Vitor Fraga still worked the night shifts. He hadn't changed his ways.

She waited and scanned the cars for his old silver Ford. She'd fantasized about this moment for years; the scenarios ever changing, the outcome always the same: Vitor Fraga 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. Searching for prying eyes, she swept her gaze over the tiny shoe-box houses of the favelas, decrepit factories and storage halls, before she returned to the inspection of a never ending procession of cars, buses and trucks.

There. A Ford. Plate matched. Lisa tensed, shifted position and adjusted the rifle's barrel on the sandbag. The car came straight toward her. Reflections danced over the windshield. She could only make out the

silhouette of a human being. Except he hardly fit the definition of human. She aimed. Rage filled her. She concentrated on her breathing. Only the one chance. Captain Hook must die.

Aiming at the right front tire, she waited for the car to approach the curve. Now. Lisa pulled the trigger. Despite the silencer, the shot echoed around her. The tire burst. The vehicle swerved, went off the bridge and dropped thirty meters, hitting the rocky ground engine first.

Lisa pointed the scope at the driver-side window and searched for a sign of life. His head rested on the steering wheel. Of course the macho didn't wear a seat belt. Was he unconscious or dead? A flame licked the side of the car.

When the fire reached his body, he still didn't move. She closed her eyes and lowered the weapon. She felt elation, relief, satisfaction. Little girls would sleep untroubled in their cells. If only she could tell them they'd be safe tonight. Memories rose. Lisa smelled the rancid odor of greasy hair and unwashed bodies huddled together in a futile attempt to protect each other.

She opened her eyes and concentrated on the here and now. Cars stopped, people clambered out to gawk. A woman drew a cell phone. Two men, one carrying a small fire extinguisher, stumbled down the slope toward the burning car. Lisa lifted the rifle and focused on the blackening figure in the driver's seat. With his face blistered and hair singed, Vitor Fraga was beyond help.

Time to go, time to forget him. Lisa collected the spent shell. Better not to leave pixie dust, Tinker Bell. She grabbed the sandbag and her bottle of water, even though it was unlikely anyone would come looking for evidence. Accidents happened. People died. Particularly in Rio de Janeiro.

# 1

Screams jerked Luiz awake. Black palm leaves swayed against the dark sky. The beach, right. He jumped to his feet. Sound asleep, his friends sprawled on the sand. Tatu rolled over and muttered something. Music blared from the Copacabana bars on the other side of the street. Yelling and drunken arguments wafted over but he caught no sign of trouble.

Calming down, Luiz strolled toward the street. At a far corner, a group of tourists negotiated with a traficante. A crowd spilled out of a bar and moved on to the next. Two prostitutes approached them with swinging hips.

A hunched figure and a young boy drew Luiz's attention. They didn't fit. The man pushed the boy down the stairs to the public toilets.

Luiz's heart hammered. He took a deep breath and decided to take a leak. He ran over the cool sand, jumped the low wall and silently crept down the concrete stairs even colder under his bare feet. Recoiling at the stench of piss, he stepped through the door.

A whimper from one of the stalls. Luiz's heart thumped against his ribs. What now? The boy might just earn himself a meal.

"No, stop! Don't."

Luiz's stomach cramped. He thrust his shoulder into the only closed door and bounced back.

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

Luiz kicked the door in, pushing the occupants against the toilet bowl and wall behind. The man cried out, his arms reaching for a hold. Luiz wanted to kick his bare ass, but he might squash the boy. He grabbed the man by the neck of his shirt and yanked him out of the stall. With his pants around his ankles, the guy stumbled and fell in front of the wash basins, swearing. Luiz kicked him in the stomach, wanted to give the bastard the beating of his life while he was down.

Behind him, the boy sobbed. Luiz reined in his scorn and squatted in front of the kid, who'd pulled up his shorts and sat on the toilet, hiding his face in

his hands.

Luiz knew better than to touch him. "Hey, it's okay. He'll leave you alone."

"I should fuck both of you," the man yelled. Luiz guessed he felt a lot braver back in his pants. He looked over his shoulder and watched him take two more steps. Luiz scowled. The man hadn't lost his appetite. No use to fight fair against a bulk like his. He had to hurt him bad. All his muscles tensed. In the toilet stall he could hardly move. He had to wait and let him get nearer.

The guy took another step. Close enough. Luiz jumped to his feet. Spinning, he hit the man in the face with his elbow. A roar of pain. Blood shot from the guy's nose. Facing the big man, Luiz kned him in the groin and shoved the whimpering bastard against the opposite wall between two basins. He patted him down, removed the money and slipped the wallet back into the man's pocket. Satisfied, Luiz pushed him toward the door and watched him shuffle away, mumbling into his hands.

Luiz crouched next to the boy who stared at his feet. "You got any friends here?"

The boy wiped at his eyes and shook his head. He was at least two years younger than Luiz, twelve at most.

"You want to stay with us? We're a tough gang. No one messes with us."

He looked up, 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'd give me money."

"He might have."

The boy heaved a shuddering breath. "It hurt. I begged. He wouldn't stop."

"I know. Forget it. Here, this is yours." Luiz slapped the bills in his hand.

Ubaldo stared at them. "Eighty Reais?"

Outside, Luiz sucked in the cool salty air. Much better. They walked to the

copse of palm trees. Tatu stepped from the shadows and waved. "Thought you might bring back something." He grinned.

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

Tatu slapped him on the back. "Hope you know how to earn your food."

Ubaldo flinched and darted Luiz a worried look.