

CHAPTER 1

RIO DE JANEIRO – THE 80's

I am alone and a frightening city sleeps on my foot. Rio de Janeiro.

It is late night. Pigeons that snug up here flew away as I arrived. They were woken up by a stranger. It's a meek, quiet and a good sleeping night down there. You just need to arrange a place to lean your head and the night does the rest of the service. There are nights that are so. They come, involve and you do not realize it. When you figured out, you've already fallen into generous Morpheus' arms.

At the beginning, you're excited in a sleepiness state that it's neither sleep nor wakefulness. That state before the leap that you take when you fall sleep. Leap that generally wakes up who sleeps on the bus and also that other person in the bed who usually calls recoil when it comes from you. But if you don't wake up with the recoil, you are able to cross the border and fall sleep for real. You get off from the shell which is the reality and then get to the core, which is the dream. At this moment, Morpheus opens his arms and you float instead of falling down. And you can't see him. The city, which my eyes can't see without astonishment, seems to be submerged at this point. It has crossed the border and will sleep well. The whole night. Like a cradle. Mother night.

This is down there. The story seems to be another here.

It's blowing strongly in the terrace of the building. The air moves nervously and it whispers insults in my ears as it passes through me. The night is no longer mother, now appears as stepmother and fell unpleasant in this place here, on this unstable parapet where I sheltered. It howls like a wolf, weaves intrigues like a butcher spider, spits winds that pray for taking my balance away. For make me plunge from the fourteen floors that separates my body from the

polluted pavement down there.

The wish is only one: jump. Jump and take it as finished, before the day dawns and I am discovered, this whole hallucinated and devoid of meaning. Before the shadows restart and the voices and threats and I see myself again cornered between a wall and a barrel of a gun.

I've never been threatened in a so scathing way before. The words used are still fresh in my mind. But now there's no certainty that they were really said, or if it's still the nightmare that doesn't let me wake up. I observe the terrible city doubting your all inhabitants. Fearing every dream that may be being produced now. The effect that they will be able to have over my altered organism. I don't see anyone conspiring at the windows. I suspect of many things and so disordered constructions. I gave up waking up, every open of the eyes was worse than the reality, bigger the ghost. I think if I'm not dying. If the death is not a dream that could swallow for good. Raving. My thoughts break up.

Dying.

It always seems so far away. Although certain, we're never ready for it. I wasn't when all of that happened. And even now, when I'm so close, I'm not yet.

It's hard to hold the blame, the fear and the remorse. All together. There's no mind that can stand it. As not enough, again the volcano blows and devastates, overwhelms, destroys the decadent city where my few memories lives.

And again, there I am in the same damn restaurant.

And again, everything happens. As at the first time.

I even doubt if it came to exist a first time or if it's been repeating since always. If my life wasn't this suffered hallucination all the time which I decided to run away now, once I cannot cope and nor survive in its coexistence.

Standing on the edge of the building, I let the wind blow. I can even hear its perverse happiness whispering. It doesn't even disguise anymore.

But I'm still afraid. I hesitate. The decision is still unanimous. I try to convince myself, saying to go soon. Saying that Natalia waits for me downstairs. Go, you can go. You don't feel anything during the fall. As I touch the ground, I will already be dead. My legs trembles and disobeys me. The time around me depletes and observes.

It is at this stopped moment that I saw a woman in the building to my left. On the terrace, alone, as I am now. Young, she looks more than me. Bundled up, like a package in the arms. It was cold. She doesn't see me, despite my suicidal position that necessarily attracts sights. If it were the day, a crowd would pile down there to see me falling down. Not this girl. Either she's off by nature or she's ignores me solemnly.

It's when I hear the distant cry of a child that I understand the package that she brings in the arms.

I feel suffocate when the following movements give a gloomy indication of the intentions of that woman.

She carries the package that cries until the edge of the building. The extended arms to the emptiness like offering what they bring. The wind, getting stronger, seems to be diabolical ecstasy for the same reason that I feel freezing by horror now.

She kisses the child's head who keeps crying. Then she throws it against the emptiness.

The huge mass of horror that suffocates me escapes at once, scratching my throat with violence. Scream. So, I almost fall from the heights along with the child.

So, the woman sees me. She wasted few minutes hearing me to scream until she also climbs on the parapet of the building. I don't know what proportion my desperation took anymore. I shout to her no, don't do that, but it's as I send a message to a remote country of unknown language.

When the woman jumps after the child, my legs falter and I kneel on the parapet, curved, crying, refusing myself to see, feel, live.

But I live. For some unfortunate reason two deaths in a row makes me move away of participating in the third one in the end. I fall from the parapet, but back to the terrace, where for some time I remain crying lives that, like mine, are worthless.

Too many deaths in a night, the wind seems to whisper to me with satisfaction. My turn was for another chance.

It's necessary to get out of there. Before dawning, discovering me or I myself explode with the vision of the child falling which I get out of my mind. Now it's a

companion of the horrible images that the past months provided.

I go down running, falling... stairs until the elevator. I keep seeing the child and the woman. I'm thinking of going home, despite of not having security there. The apartment will be rummaged soon and the death will be on my foot. Impossible to be indifferent to the irony of the things: in a week, I had a girlfriend and I was making plans for living together. The following one, I don't have where to live, my girlfriend is dead and a murder wants my head.

There's no one when I get in the apartment that I share with a friend. Marcelo has already ran away taking all his stuff. He's going to get away for a while and we won't know anything about each other for our own safety. My stuff is still here. I wouldn't need them to throw from the top of the building. But the situation is different now.

I don't know what is inside me that tells me to keep alive. I don't know why I listen to her. I've already lost a woman who I loved and my death is just a matter of time. A man that wants to kill is a professional of the death and, sooner or later, he is going to find me, he has the means to do it. I don't see possibilities to run away, let alone facing him, and even though it seems I am decided to persist against the inevitable. Whatever.

The first thing that I take is my agenda with my contacts. I also look for any loose sheet of paper or note indicating my acquaintances. I do all of it very fast, I hope I'm not forgetting anything. In an old backpack, I put some clothes, medicines, something to eat, Walkman, computer diskettes, worth stuff that I may sell if necessary. I feel like taking some CDs, but no. I look at the computer. Marcelo must have already deleted all the files, but it's better check that out. I do everything very fast and the delay for the machine to turn on unnerves me. I can't stop looking at the door in front of me.

Millions of thoughts at the same time. What should I do, run away to where, stay in Rio or go to the countryside, to another state? If I were in a film, I would wait for the killer and would set an ambush. But I'm not any idiot, in spite of the stupid mistake that I did.

I lose myself in memories once again. The restaurant. Natalia. Then the hospital. And the building. The child. Repeated disasters happen and I witness all, every time. In some very small corner, I even wonder if someday I will have

peace again.

I check my e-mail. Two messages that I delete without reading. I start to get sleepy. Bad sign. I run to the kitchen, find some coffee in the bottle. It's cold, but that's alright. I drink without sugar, as it was water. I need to get out of here soon. I'm wasting too much time. A last check in the apartment, actually a farewell and I walk to the door.

Then the telephone rings.

I was already with the door keys, ready for going out. Absurd indecision, inexplicable, childish, but that paralyzed me completely. I try not to think. It can't be any friend, all of them were advised that both I and Marcelo would travel. Actually, it can't be anyone. It's better to let it ring.

But I pick it up.

"Hello."

"Zeca? It's Nicole!"

I was taken by surprise. Nicole is an old friend, ex-girlfriend, living in the US with her husband for almost one year. I've been keeping some contact backwards and forwards, sometimes by phone, but almost always through the internet. This call provides me a first smile in days.

"Nicole, where are you?"

"I'm in Rio, I got here two hours ago. I've already called you plenty of times and no one answer it, I sent you an e-mail but nothing. Where is Marcelo?"

"Marcelo is travelling. I was leaving too..."

"Travelling? To where? And you? How is Natalia?"

"She's fine, but Marcelo went to..."

"Look, I'm at the Hotel Camilo, apartment number 601, I will stay here until Wednesday. Try to look for me or we set a meeting. I miss you."

"Yes, let's arrange it, I'll tell everyone."

"What weird noise through the phone is that, Zeca? Is there anyone in the phone extension?"

"No, I'm alone. But let's arrange it. I'll call you."

"Alright, I will let you alone because I realize that you need to go out. Big kiss."

"Kiss, Nicole."

“Give a kiss on Marcelo too.”

“I will. Bye.”

I hang up the phone thinking that it would be good to talk to Nicole. Actually, to anyone, but it's not hard to forecast that the coming days will be lonely. I open the door after being sure through the peephole that anyone wasn't waiting for me outside. The way seems clear. I don't know why, but talking to Nicole gave me some joy. Like if the devastated world where I got in had windows, where it's possible to see the landscape outside. I even think about the possibility to be worried for nothing. I almost let me go by the excess of optimism.

The telephone rings again and I go back from the door to pick up.

“Hello!”

I hang up the telephone right away, realizing that it was my own stupidity in the end.

It was him.

“What weird noise through the phone is that, Zeca? Is there anyone in the phone extension?”

Him too.

I rummage the telephone directories. I need the number of the Hotel Camilo. My hands shake. I find it, but I can't call from here. He is listening to me.

I go out, running.

My silliness risked Nicole's life.