

## Chapter One

### Pistoleiros

I'm sitting in the back seat thinking, nuns can't drive. Or maybe it's just nuns with a lot on their minds. Or maybe it's just Sister Leonora, bearing on her sixty-four-year-old shoulders the weight of slavery, kleptocracy, landlessness, lawlessness, forest fires, hit squads, environmental devastation, and the ravages of capitalism. The year is 2010 and she's driving erratically down a ragged highway in the central Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, just south of a state called Amazonas. She speeds up, slacks off, squints into the dark beyond the headlights, then remembers the rearview mirror, then remembers the accelerator.

Half the problem, I think, is the woman sitting next to her, Elizete. She's telling a florid, multi-faceted tale of political shenanigans at town hall in Terra Nova do Norte. She works there, a sub-secretary of environmental issues, knee-deep in a political slurry of "detoured" money. She hates it. As she tells her tale of atrocities, her voice soars and sings with emotional involvement. I'd have trouble driving, too.

Then Leonora stops her with a finger tapping the rearview mirror. "They're following us," she says.

"Who?" Elizete asks.

"Pistoleiros."

No matter how fast she goes, she says, they stay a few hundred meters behind, never closer, never farther. They've been with us since we filled the tank back in Alta Floresta, half an hour ago. She was pretty sure she recognized them back there, the car anyway. We're still an hour from the next town. Between here and there the houses are few, cars rare, the sky more than dark with the smoke of burning pastures and the scant patches of forest that remain in this part of Amazonia. It's a good place for a hit. There's no cell phone signal, but that matters little since there's no one to call. Certainly not the police. The guys in the car behind us are probably police,

off duty for the moment. Leonora says, “If there’s a police block up ahead, you two take care of yourselves. Don’t worry about me.”

Take care of ourselves? I have no idea how to do that if police are stopping us for the convenience of hit men. What are we supposed to do? Bribe? Bolt? Cower? Plead?

She hits the brakes hard at the edge of the bridge over the Rio Teles Pires. It’s an especially rough hundred yards of narrow, cratered concrete. The car behind us is suddenly on our bumper, its lights filling our car and flooding Leonora’s face. There’s no backing up, no turning off, no dodging, nobody around. Leonora doesn’t tell us then, only later, that she feared this was the moment she’s been expecting for the last ten years, the moment she finds out for sure what God does with the dead.

On the other hand, maybe they’re just following her, keeping tabs on where she goes and who she’s with. They do that sometimes.

This nun, it turns out, can drive just fine. The pistoleiros stay on us as we rumble over the bridge, then fall back as Leonora picks up what little speed her little car can muster. She veers right onto the highway toward Terra Nova and swerves around a truck piled with furniture and peasants. Just up the road is the little eatery where we’d had lunch that day, run by a family that loves her. I offer the unneeded advice to duck off the highway there. The highway dips for a stretch, then rises, and there’s the restaurant. While the car behind us is in the dip, its headlights out of sight, Leonora dives to the left, scoots behind a tree, snaps off the lights. Half a minute later, a car rises from the dip in the road and screams by. It’s a dark blue VW Gol.

“That’s them,” she says.