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**CHAPTER ONE**

***Nova Esperancia, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil***

***Monday 7 December 1970, 2.20pm***

At first no-one realised the earth was moving.

The rain had been falling for hours. The parched soil had initially welcomed the unexpected rainfall, the water quickly disappearing into the wide cracks networking the sun-baked earth.

But it had nowhere to go. The forest that had once covered the hills behind the shanty town of Nova Esperancia had gone, the trees felled and the land cleared by the ever-expanding population of the *favela*, desperate for more space to raise a few scrawny chickens or a half-starved cow. The villagers hadn't realised it was the trees that had held the hills together. In a few seasons, the rich, absorbent topsoil, deprived of the tree roots to which it had clung, had been washed away. The clay beneath could not absorb the rainfall. Instead the water, unchecked and unseen, ran straight down the hill towards Nova Esperancia.

Half a mile from the village, Maria Manuela straightened up from the chipped porcelain sink beside the *favela's* lone water standpipe.

‘Juanita? Did you hear that?’

Her daughter stopped trying to wring the dirty water from the faded shirt she was washing. It had rained for so long that they’d given up waiting for sunshine in which to do the laundry. ‘Did I hear what?’

They stood motionless beside the sink, straining to hear beyond the steady thrumming of the rain on the corrugated roofs of the *favela*. Juanita shook her head and turned back to her washing.

‘It’s nothing. Just the rain.’ She gave the last shirt a futile squeeze and dumped it in the bucket of clean clothing beneath the sink. ‘I hate this weather.’

Maria picked up the heavy bucket of washing, shouldering it easily as Juanita gathered the basket containing her sleeping baby and sheltered his face from the rain with the hem of her skirt. The two women bent their heads against the downpour as they walked along the narrow dirt alley that served as the main street. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Their feet squelched in the mud as they tried to avoid the more noisome rubbish that had risen with the water level. Juanita swerved to avoid the rotting carcass of a dead cat, blocked from floating out into the street by the rusty sign that had once adorned the *favela's* first - and last - Health Clinic. Nova Esperancia, New Hope. Some

hope. Within weeks of its much-publicised opening by one of Brazil's senior High Court Judges, Fernando Moreno, the Clinic had been reduced to an empty shell, the shining instruments and newly stocked drug cupboard ransacked by villagers to whom food meant more than clean syringes or penicillin. Now not even the doors or window panes remained.

'Grandma! You're back! And Mama!'

Juanita ignored her eldest son as he ran out of the shack she shared with her mother, her husband and her two younger sisters. She shifted the basket containing her baby in her arms, the muscles in her back protesting. The unborn child within her kicked in rebellion.

Maria dumped the bucket of damp washing and stretched out her arms. '*Querido!*' She scooped the three-year-old boy into her arms and held him tightly against her chest. 'Well, Claudio, what have you been doing?'

The child wriggled. 'The giants are coming, Grandma. We heard them in the hills.'

'The giants, hmm?'

'Oh yes. Their footsteps made the earth shake.'

Juanita addressed the little girl sitting in a corner of the shack. 'You felt them too, did you,

Elizabetta?’

The girl nodded. ‘They sounded angry. I didn’t like them. I don’t want them to come here.’

‘It’s your mother who will be angry, Eliza, if you don’t get home before dusk,’ Maria said. ‘You know she needs you, with the new baby coming so soon. You can’t spend all your time here, playing with Claudio.’

Eliza nodded again. ‘Because I’m a girl. Boys are so useless.’

Juanita suppressed a smile. Elizabetta reminded her of herself as she had once been, before life and poverty ground her down. The child was still confident, still certain that her life would be different from that of her mother and her sisters. At four years old, Elizabetta had yet to learn that the few meagre opportunities life offered were not meant for a child who had had the misfortune to be born a girl.

‘Girls are no good for anything but having babies,’ Claudio countered from the safety of his grandmother’s arms. ‘Father Lucio said so.’

‘Juanita,’ Maria warned, raising her voice to be heard over the noise of the rising storm. ‘Not in front of the little ones...’

Juanita never had the chance to reply.

The thin layer of loose topsoil on which Nova Esperancia had been built could take no more. The whole town had become a giant crumb floating on a soup of water, gravel and dirt. A low, terrible roar like the rumble of thunder echoed through the hills as the upper layers of the *favella*, wrenched free of their fragile foundations, slid downwards towards the valley on a deadly slurry of mud and rocks. The flimsy shacks constructed from iron, cardboard, plywood and cloth collapsed before it like a deck of cards, trapping people beneath their weight. Those who were not instantly crushed to death were smothered by the mud as it bore inexorably downwards. In a matter of seconds, streets and houses concertinaed on top of each other, half a mile of the *favella* crushed into a few jagged feet of iron and blood.

A sheet of corrugated iron detached itself from the roof and neatly decapitated Juanita where she stood. Claudio ran towards his mother and was felled instantly by a second sheet of metal as the walls collapsed inward. He did not get up.

Acting on instinct, Maria shoved the little girl beneath the bed and ran towards the door to gather the baby from its basket. In the street outside, even as she watched, a gaping crack twenty feet wide split the ground open and swallowed half-a-dozen homes before snapping shut again as the hillside gave another convulsive heave. A woman, her legs trapped inside the ground as it closed around her, struggled desperately to free herself, her hands clawing frantically at the earth as the rubble of the town rushed towards her. Her cries were buried beneath tons of mud and metal and rock. Maria

watched as people hurtled past her, hopelessly trying to outrun the landslide, tumbling and disappearing as the tide of rubble and mud caught up with them and swept on past. The *favella* had been home to over twenty thousand people. How many would survive this terrible onslaught?

Despair overwhelmed her. Nothing remained of her home or her family. She had seen Juanita and Claudio die. The bed was gone, Elizabetta with it.

She sank to her knees, the baby in her arms.

*'Ave Maria, gratia plena,*

*Dominus tecum,*

*Benedicta tu in mulieribus,*

*Et benedictus fructus....'*

Death, when it came, was a relief.