

Chapter 1

The Banco do Brasil had three guards.

The three guards wore blue uniforms with silver buttons. Each of them carried a pair of handcuffs, two tear gas canisters and a pistol.

It was a hot afternoon. Inside the bank, the air conditioning was turned up to full, but the air was still steamy. Most of the clerks had big patches of sweat on their shirts. The customers fanned their faces with their hands.

The three guards were tired. They stared at the pretty girls who came into the bank. They chatted to the customers, discussing the weather or the news or last weekend's football results. They dreamed about dinner. It was an effort just to keep their eyes open.

When a voice shouted, 'NOBODY MOVE!' the three guards didn't know what to do. They looked around, trying to see who was shouting at them. The voice shouted again, even louder, 'I SAID, NOBODY MOVE! STAY EXACTLY WHERE YOU ARE!'

One of the guards reached for his gun. Immediately, a bullet flew through the air and smashed into the wall behind him, knocking out chunks of brick and plaster. The voice shouted again, 'DIDN'T I TELL YOU NOT TO MOVE?'

'I'm sorry,' whispered the guard.

‘No moving,’ said the voice. ‘And no talking. Do you understand?’

The guard wanted to say ‘yes’ but he knew that he wasn’t supposed to talk. So he nodded.

‘Good,’ said the voice. ‘I want everyone to lie on the floor. Down on the floor! Right now!’

They did what they were told. The guards and the customers and the clerks and the manager – they all lay down on the floor. Only three people were left standing. Three men. They wore black suits and white shirts and black ties. They had black masks covering their faces. They were holding Uzis. (An Uzi, in case you don’t already know, is a small and very effective machine-gun, capable of firing six hundred rounds per minute.)

One of the masked men pointed his Uzi at the three guards. He said, ‘You move, I shoot. You talk, I shoot. Understand?’

The three guards nodded.

Another of the masked men strolled over to the bank manager and said, ‘Open the safe. Now. Understand?’

‘Ye-ye-ye-yes,’ stammered the manager. Ever since he was promoted to manager of the Banco do Brasil, he had been expecting a robbery, but that didn’t make it any less terrifying. ‘Of-of-of cour-cour-course I understa-sta-stand.’

‘Don’t talk,’ said the man in the black mask. ‘Just open the safe.’

The manager nodded. ‘Thi-thi-this way.’

Together, the manager and the man in the black mask walked to the back of the bank. They went to the vault where the money was stored. There, the man in the black

mask filled five big brown sacks with cash. One by one, he carried the five full sacks back into the bank.

The first robber picked up two sacks. The second robber picked up two more and said, 'Let's go.' They ran towards the door.

The third robber picked up the fifth sack. He had only one arm, so he could only carry one sack. Where his left arm should have been, he had an empty sleeve. Carrying his sack of money, he ran after the others. When he reached the door, he stopped and put the sack on the ground. He looked up at the CCTV camera that recorded everyone who walked into the bank.

He pulled off his mask and threw it on the floor.

He stared into the lens of the camera.

He smiled as if he was posing for a photograph.

Every policeman or policewoman in Brazil would recognise his face. They would recognise his lean cheeks and his black hair and his bushy eyebrows. Most of all, they would recognise the crazy look in his eyes. They would say, 'Oh, no.' They would say, 'Not him.' They would say, 'Pelottinho is back in Brazil.'

Pelottinho.

That name would be enough to send shivers through the spine of any policeman or policewoman in Brazil.

His real name was Felipe Pelotti, but everyone called him Pelottinho. 'Pelottinho' means 'little Pelotti'. Pelottinho was the youngest and craziest of the three Pelotti brothers, the most successful gang of bank robbers in Brazilian history.

Pelottinho lifted his Uzi and fired a stream of bullets

directly into the CCTV camera.

The lens exploded. Glass splattered everywhere. The camera drooped and swung in the air, attached to the wall by just a couple of bright green wires.

Pelottinho laughed. His laughter was loud and carefree and quite insane. Tucking his gun into his belt, he grabbed the sack of money and ran out of the bank.

In the street, a silver Mercedes was waiting. The engine was running. The back door was open. The other two Pelottis were already inside the Mercedes, waiting impatiently for their youngest, craziest brother.

Pelottinho leaped into the Mercedes and threw the sack onto the back seat beside him. He slammed the door. The engine roared. The wheels spun. Fumes gushed out of the exhaust.

At that moment, the doors of the bank sprang open and the three security guards ran out. They drew their pistols. The Mercedes sped down the street. The three security guards started shooting.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

One bullet hit an old lady's shopping bags, puncturing a carton of orange juice. Another bullet smashed the windscreen of a lorry. Two more bullets blew out the tyres of a bus. A fifth bullet hit a statue of Emperor Pedro the Second and knocked off his nose. But not a single bullet touched the Mercedes.

Out of the back window, Pelottinho waved his arm – his one and only arm – at the security guards.

Then the Mercedes turned the corner and the Pelottis were gone.

Chapter 2

All around the Chief of Police, people were working. Police officers were interviewing the customers who had been inside the bank during the robbery. Forensics experts dusted the surfaces for fingerprints. DNA experts scraped samples into test tubes. Shoe experts squatted on the floor, drawing chalk lines around muddy footprints. Ballistics experts stuffed bullets into plastic bags. Balaclava experts inspected the black woollen mask that Pelottinho had been wearing.

The Chief of Police was a short, fat man with a round face, red cheeks and a shiny bald head. His name was Luis Gomez da Silva Mendoza Careca, but everyone called him 'sir'.

'Sir? Sir? Sir, we have the photograph, sir.'

Chief Careca stared at the junior police officer who was standing beside him. 'What did you say?'

'We've printed the photograph, sir. From the CCTV camera.' The junior officer looked nervous. His name was Detective Perriera, and he had just been promoted to the Serious Crimes Unit. This was his first week on the job. He was holding a black-and-white photo.

'Give that to me,' said Chief Careca.

'Yes, sir.'

Chief Careca grabbed the photo. He stared at the face. In a quiet voice, he whispered, 'Pelottinho.' Then he

whispered the name again, very slowly, rolling every syllable around his tongue. ‘Pel-lot-tin-nho. You shouldn’t have come back to Rio, Pelottinho. This time, Pelottinho, things will be different. This time, Pelottinho, you will not escape me.’

The bank manager emerged from the vaults and walked slowly to the Chief of Police. He looked gloomy. He had spent the past three hours counting all the money in the vault. ‘I’ve finished,’ he said.

Chief Careca said, ‘So? How much did they get?’

‘A hundred and twenty-three million reais.’

Chief Careca blinked, unable to believe his ears. ‘A hundred and what?’

‘A hundred and twenty-three million reais,’ said the bank manager. He sounded as if he could hardly believe it himself.

‘Those monkeys,’ muttered Chief Careca. ‘Those rats. Those pigs. Are they trying to make me look like a complete idiot?’

If you’re British, a hundred and twenty-three million reais is the equivalent of thirty-two million pounds. Or fifty-five million dollars if you’re American. Or... well, whoever you are, and wherever you live, it’s an awful lot of money.

The bank manager said, ‘So, what are you going to do?’

‘Do?’ Chief Careca blinked. A dribble of sweat quivered on his upper lip. ‘What do you think I’m going to do?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest,’ said the bank manager. ‘What are you going to do?’

Chief Careca’s red cheeks glowed like the flames of a forest fire. He roared, ‘I’m going to catch those three Pelotti brothers! And then I’m going to make them wish that they had never been born!’ For the first time that day, he smiled. He rubbed his hands together, imagining all the cruel and terrible tortures that he would inflict on the three Pelotti brothers – and especially on the youngest, the wildest, the craziest, the most infuriating of them all, Felipe Pelotti, better known as Pelottinho.

A week later, on the other side of Rio de Janeiro, three men walked into a bank. They ordered everyone to lie on the floor, then forced the manager to open the vault and stuffed five brown sacks with cash. That time, the Pelotti gang got away with ninety-seven million reais.

Three days after that, the Pelottis robbed another bank in Rio. They stole eighty-eight million reais, six bags of diamonds, nine gold ingots and the salami sandwich that the bank manager had been planning to have for lunch.

Six days after that, they went back to the Banco do Brasil, and robbed it again. This time, they got away with a hundred and four million reais.

If this carried on for much longer, there wouldn’t be any money left in Brazil. The Pelotti brothers would have it all.

Someone had to stop them.

But who?