



Born in Rio

By Cássia Martins

No personal life. No friends. A life dedicated to a lucrative career in New York City as one of the few successful women of her trade. The only family she has ever known is her mother, who she keeps as much distance from as she possibly can.

All of that is about to change...

Rita Ray was cold-hearted, no doubt, a straight shooter making an enviable life in the finance world. She had no real recollections of her childhood before the age of ten, when she fled with her mother from Brazil to the United States. She never learned why. A box of letters, found following her mother's death, will reveal evidence of an unknown past back in Brazil.

Born in Rio is a moving, psychologically charged novel with thrilling turns, embraced by a contemporary love affair in Rio de Janeiro. The city provides Rita with both a backdrop and a tonic. Strange coincidences, along a welcoming, but eccentric Bossa Nova music instructor, a handsome lawyer-turned-health-foods-chef, and the fervor of Brazilian culture fuel Rita to unravel her mother's secrets, her unknown father's baffling past... and the truth behind her own story.

Rita's journey of discovery, and self-discovery, delights readers in a well-crafted plot among lush descriptions of Brazil—its history, its people and its soul. Laced with wit and spiced with mystery, it's a compelling, transporting tale with a heart. In the 2016 Summer Olympic city Rita might just find what she never thought she was looking for.

An immigrant story. A devastating crime. A chance to forgive, to love again.

And a woman born in Rio.

Chapter 1

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My journey started the day I stood still, motionless in front of a mirror. I couldn't think straight, or move forward with the errands I usually did on a Tuesday morning before heading to work. My daily morning run, the coffee I typically brewed, and the hair I put up in a bun before washing my face—I did none of those things that morning. I just continued to stare at the reflection of my big brown eyes in the bathroom mirror, searching for answers.

A lot had happened before that Tuesday morning when I stood motionless in the bathroom of my New York apartment. Had the past three weeks I was away changed my morning habits? Had they changed me forever? I couldn't ponder such questions. I was used to being numb, as I had been for most of my adult life. So I just stood still, searching for myself in my reflection in the mirror, looking at the red birthmark on my forehead, with no make-up, no expression, and no tears.

Tears had become foreign to me. After a while I didn't blink and my eyes became dry. I closed them. I couldn't remember the last time I had cried. While I was away, for the past three weeks, I had witnessed so much, yet no tears came to my eyes.

My usual concise, premeditated and controlled demeanor was nowhere to be found that morning. I have no idea how long I just stood there, immobile, locked in the bathroom, looking at my tearless eyes in the mirror. I didn't hear the eleven missed calls on my mobile phone, so I missed all of my business conference calls that morning. As I made my way through the spacious room of my apartment, barely noticing the view of the Manhattan East River, I lost track of time. I sat on the edge of the bed, draped in white linens, and I stared at my open suitcase. My eyes were drawn to a simple red box, and a sigh escaped my lips as I thought of the hundreds of letters that lay within—the letters that made me embark on a journey that completely transformed me. They were all mailed from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and written by the same person; a woman as of yet unknown to me. Her name was Elisabeth.

Chapter 2

It had all started three weeks before. When I returned from my daily morning run along the Manhattan East River, my home phone rang. It was the call that took me off my path. I instantly thought: *who could possibly be calling me on a Monday morning?* No one, except the building concierge and my mother, called me on my landline.

“Could I please speak with Ms. Rita Ray?” inquired the stern female voice on the other end of the receiver that morning.

“Speaking.”

“I am the head nurse at the West Palm Beach Medical Center. Are you Ms. Maia Ray’s daughter?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Ms. Ray, your mother was hospitalized this morning.”

I choked on the water I was drinking.

Allow me to explain where I stood in my life before its path was forever changed. Perhaps this way the unavoidable choices, the drastic turns I was destined to face, will make sense. You see, I had been a straight shooter up to that point. I had earned a career in banking that was enviable to many. Eight years ago I was hired as an associate for a prominent financial institution in New York City. I thought on my feet, I read the newspaper every morning and I could hold conversations on many topics. I learned how to be pleasant with clients, ask them about their families or hobbies, and even though I had no interest in their responses, I would always listen before I spoke. People always remembered my intelligent insights. I engaged in small talk only when there was something in it for me. Most days I went in and out of the office without greeting the administrative staff, or my subordinates. Time was too precious to waste. I saved my energy exclusively for my business trips and clients. As a reserved person, I couldn’t tolerate uncomfortable feelings. The world of finance suited me well. My life was my job and my job was my life.

But my life hadn’t always been like this.

Twenty-seven years ago I left Rio de Janeiro Airport in Brazil on a one-way flight bound to Miami, Florida. I was only ten when I came with my mother to the United States. My mother never explained to me how or why we came to America. My new life helped me forget about the time spent growing up in Brazil. That would later change: memories would come back to haunt me, unexplained.

As soon as we arrived in the United States, my mother encouraged me to learn English and assimilate with the new culture. At home we both spoke Portuguese, our mother tongue, but eventually I made English my first language and my mother never objected. During my last year of high school I moved out. After graduating from university in Florida, I settled in Manhattan, my home for the last fifteen years. I never went back to live in South Florida again.

In New York, my energy was concentrated on my career. Shortly after receiving a master's degree in finance, the bank hired me. The first few years as an associate were painful. Besides working late hours, I had to be pleasant to my superiors' administrative staff just to be in on the bank's office politics. This gave me access to privileged information, like knowing who was getting fired or who was being promoted. I made sure to chat with the secretaries when no one was around, so my bosses would never suspect where my astute intuition came from. It wasn't long before I was promoted, managing my own accounts and originating clients on my own. I was fed by the power I enjoyed as a senior manager.

I had no social life outside of work. My relationships were strictly professional, since I never felt I could trust anyone. I would do little favors for people, always extracting something in return. People I felt were untrustworthy, unreliable or incompetent were cut off my list. Once, before becoming a manager, I overheard a co-worker refer to me as a "bitch," but I didn't mind. I knew he would eventually either leave or be let go—as was the case with most. I paid special attention to how my colleagues talked about our bosses, and how much information they leaked. I always knew that someday I would be high up in the corporate chain, and this was a way of testing the people I would later choose to work for me.

I never socialized on weekends and always politely declined the few invitations, alleging either that I was not feeling well or that I had a family gathering to attend. Only I had no family—with the exception of my mother, who lived miles away in South Florida. At thirty-seven, I was far from wanting a family of my own; I couldn't remember the last time the thought came up. I wanted no chaos in my life.

But I have come to learn that life happens independent from what we want.

"Ms. Ray, are you okay?" inquired the nurse as I continued to cough.

The last time I had spoken with my mother was over a month ago. She always called once a month on Sunday nights, on the landline. We had talked briefly; I had asked how she was doing and she seemed fine. In an instant I remembered: she was supposed to have called me this Sunday, the day before. But she hadn't.

"Yes, sorry, please continue, what happened?"

"Your mother was found in her bed unconscious this morning. Her gardener called 911 after he knocked on the door and she didn't answer. Her vital signs are now stabilized, but we are running some tests."

"Is she okay?"

"We don't know yet, we are contacting you as you are listed as her sole emergency contact. Does she have anyone else in South Florida?"

"No. I mean... I don't know. How is she doing?"

“She is recovering now. We believe she fell unconscious in her sleep. Good thing she’s an early bird and someone found her. Is there anything in her medical history that we should know about?”

That was a question I was unable to answer. I hadn’t lived with my mother for the last twenty years. If my mother was ever sick, she would never share that with me or anyone else. She took pride in being healthy and strong, waking up early every day to work with her plants. And she never liked going to the doctor. Whenever we spoke on the phone she would always respond that her health was “as good as it gets.” Then, she would often say: “I am like an orchid, *Ritinha*. People think they are delicate and weak flowers, but they survive the harshest south Florida showers!”

My mother, Maia, could certainly be seen as delicate. She was a petite woman in a five foot, four-inch frame, with short, but sturdy legs, and small, but muscular, arms. She was not skinny, although it seemed like it because she always wore loose-fitting clothes. I knew my mother was strong. She had endured many difficulties when immigrating to the United States from Brazil.

I didn’t remember much of my life in Brazil, although I did recall many of the manual labor jobs my mother had when we first arrived in Florida. Besides cleaning homes, painting houses, cooking and landscaping, my mother always managed to keep our home spotless. I always had clean clothes, home-cooked meals and the necessary supplies for school. Even though money was tight, she worked extra hours gardening during the month of April, so she could bake me a cake and buy me the gift I wanted for my birthday.

“I don’t recall her having any medical problems,” I responded.

“Will you arrange for someone to be here with her? Maybe you can contact her doctor.”

I didn’t know whether my mother had a doctor because I didn’t know much about her life. But I didn’t want the nurse to know that.

“I will contact our family doctor,” I said.

Chapter 3

For reasons I cannot explain, that day I felt obliged to be with my mother. I went to work as usual that morning, sat down on my desk and called in to the customary Monday morning conference call. But throughout the entire duration of the call, I found myself searching for plane tickets to South Florida on the computer. It was so unlike me to not be completely focused and engaged in the conference call. I made no objections, didn't give any updates on my accounts, nor scolded any of my subordinates for not being aggressive enough in getting clients. As soon as the call was over, I went straight to the Executive Vice President's office, without greeting his secretary, and made my way inside with an added sense of urgency.

I had a plan since Day One at the bank and, after eight years, I had executed the plan flawlessly: I was promoted to Vice President just over a year ago. Other than being a pleasant person around clients, I knew looking good was part of my job. I always looked impeccable. I had a great figure, thanks to my longtime running habit. Waking up in the morning to jog along the Manhattan East River made me feel grounded, like I had a purpose in life, the same way a million dollars felt to me. My mind and body were aligned and I felt sharp and confident at work because I was a runner.

My exotic look attracted much attention. I am five feet and seven inches tall, with an olive, but fair, complexion, and long brown hair, which I typically swept into a bun at work. However, when I wanted to be noticed, I would let my hair down; it framed my delicate face adorned with big brown eyes. I knew I was attractive and although I seamlessly walked in and out of the office, I did spend quite a bit of time taking care of my appearance. It was part of my job. I avoided alcohol socially, keeping it to an acceptable level. However, I often drank at home, alone. When I was not traveling for work, my weekends were for myself, but most times I would work. Work didn't bother me; I had always liked to keep busy.

Men had always shown an interest in me. I suspect they were attracted to my mysterious ways. My past affairs had never lasted more than three months. So I concentrated my energy in my professional success. I hadn't stopped dating entirely, but I never wanted a serious relationship. My dating pool was confined to work, as I didn't have a rich social life outside of it. I got involved with powerful people in the financial industry. I nurtured special relationships with my bosses. I didn't mind being courted by my superiors or my clients—because I was never the one to pursue them. Often they would invite me for expensive dinners, weekend trips to exotic destinations or give me a piece of jewelry, which I would accept, effortlessly. But nothing impressed me. I was not emotionally attached to anyone, and the thrill was one of the few things

that excited me. They entrusted me with money, I knew exactly what to do with it and how much they were worth. The only consequence to being intimately involved with men that had power over me was that I moved on to managing a few more millions in my portfolio, getting more financial returns for my clients and for myself. Or at least that was what I chose to believe back then anyway.

“Hi, Richard,” I addressed my boss as I walked into his office, with an added courage that came from who knows where.

Richard was the Executive Vice President of the private banking division I worked in. I remembered the first few years at the bank when I would only discreetly glance inside his office. I would catch a glimpse of a picture frame he had displayed behind his desk. It was a picture of his family. His wife was smiling while holding two angelic-looking children who were just as beautiful as she was. They were on a garden, in front of their lovely two-story white home in Westchester County. I used to think Richard was lucky to have it all: a beautiful family, a gorgeous home, a powerful job. Over the years, I got promoted and Richard became my boss. During the eight years I spent at the bank he never changed that photo. Sometimes he would casually mention his family and I began to wonder if they really existed. In my mind, that photo had become a symbolic allusion to a family. I noticed it then as I entered his overpowering office. I was thinking of my own family.

“You were awfully quiet during the call,” he said without taking his eyes off of his computer monitor and shaking his legs. “Hope you have the new Amos account under control for this month’s pipeline...” he continued, with a hint of irony.

“I need to leave,” I said sternly.

“Sure, no one is holding you, just go,” he mockingly responded, then laughed sarcastically. “What’s wrong with you, Rita?”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Richard stopped browsing his computer and turned his chair to face me.

“Did Charles recruit you, too? What is he...doing you?” he exclaimed, “What a fucking bastard... I was so glad they got rid of that jerk and now he’s sucking up to my entire team...”

I interrupted him before he could continue his rant.

“No, Dick. I need a leave of absence.”

He sighed, leaned back in his leather chair, tilted his head to the right and looked intensely into my eyes, like he had done many times before.

“Rita, there is no such thing as a *leave* in our business... you know that. But I can’t afford to lose you since you bring in so much money. I don’t care what you have going on in your life. Go talk to Vera, figure out what you need to do. I want you back though, and I will expect you to meet your target.” He turned the chair back to face the monitor, started browsing on his computer again and rambled, “I might even double it, since you want to take time off...”

Before he could finish his sentence I had left the room. I just felt that I needed to get out of there.

It was already lunch time when I got on a New York yellow taxi and headed home. I had talked to Vera, the senior human resource manager, and handled the logistics for my absence. I never once mentioned the reason for my leave. I was to stay away for no longer than a month and every once in a while I had to check in with my team. I made Alan, a young banker I had recently recruited from a competing bank, responsible for my accounts while I was gone. I got home that afternoon and instantly booked my ticket. I bought the first flight out of La Guardia Airport into West Palm Beach the next day, which would leave me time to pack and take care of errands before I left. I walked to the kitchen and, as I poured some apple juice into a glass, I noticed a green light blinking on my phone. That was rare; nobody called my landline. I picked up the receiver and listened to the voice message.

“Ms. Ray, I am calling you again from West Palm Beach Medical Center. Unfortunately I’m afraid I don’t have good news for you about your mother. Could you please call us as soon as you can? It’s urgent.”

I instantly put the receiver back in its base and changed my ticket for the first flight I found out of New York. Hurriedly, I called the hospital back and arranged for a meeting with the physician in charge of my mother first thing in the morning. I spoke with the head nurse, who informed me that the doctors suspected her condition was worse than they had previously thought and that she would need to stay overnight. I agreed for my mother to have the necessary tests done that afternoon so I could talk to the doctors the next day. I spared no costs to see my mother and arranged for an overnight stay at a nearby hotel upon my arrival.

Chapter 4

The humid breeze I felt that night as I got off the plane in West Palm Beach sent chills up my spine. I had been to South Florida a few times on business trips, but this time the breeze was different. I felt the swamp in my skin. It was as if I had just been dropped out of dry land into damp, muggy, wet soil. I smelled the swells and saw the fog, even though it was a clear night in West Palm Beach Airport. I heard the long and loud calls of frogs, the hiss of snakes and the grunts of gators—even though I was miles away from the Everglades swamp. South Florida that night felt like a place I had left behind for good and never turned back. South Florida felt as crammed, as hot and as moist as a woman’s womb.

I continued to feel as if I was walking on quicksand, unstable. I drove towards the hospital, engulfed by the emptiness within. It was early evening when I arrived and the nurse informed me that my mother was in stable condition, but she wasn’t well. It had been a tense day for my mother; she had undergone many diagnostic tests that afternoon. The nurse advised it was best for me to wait to see her in the morning. But I wanted to see her that evening. After getting a visitor ID, I was escorted by the night shift nurse to the hospital family waiting room. It was a cold, lonely and stern place. A few minutes later, the nurse came back and guided me to her room; I could only glimpse at my mother for a few moments.

The moment I saw my mother’s room, I got shivers down my spine. I didn’t know if it was because of the extremely cold air conditioning, the unmistakable smell of ammonia and alcohol or the scent of death. I opened the cold, heavy door and carefully stepped into the dim room. There was a monitor hooked to the wall, a table and a sofa chair below the window, and, in front of them, the hospital bed. I heard nothing. I felt relieved; as far as I could tell, the bed was empty. I stopped moving and for an instant I leaned back determined to leave this place that was so alien to me.

“There she lies,” whispered the nurse.

My feet felt stuck to the cold hospital floor. I didn’t want to move forward, I didn’t want to see what I dreaded. Looking closely, I realized that there was indeed a figure underneath the light blue hospital sheets. It was my mother. She had become so small, so frail, that I couldn’t recognize her tiny body underneath. I felt the cold sweat on my face, my legs threatened to give way. I sighed, leaning forward to confirm the nurse’s words; it was indeed my mother. Her face had become unrecognizable to me. The once healthy, tanned cheeks that spotted dimples when she smiled had become wrinkled flesh over bone. Her skin, once beautifully glowing, sun tanned

to a dark olive tone, looked pallid and lifeless. Her eyelids were down and her semblance was so brittle. I held my breath; I was scared that even a puff of air might break her.

“You can speak with her tomorrow. It’s time to leave now,” the nurse whispered, gently placing her hands on my right shoulder and leading me towards the door.

I managed to step back, even though I could no longer feel my legs. With wide eyes I stared; at nowhere, my jaw slightly open and, incapable of feeling or thinking, I walked through the hospital corridors. I was going through a bright white cold tunnel where the lights blinded my eyes, the iciness numbed my skin and the end was nowhere to be seen. The nurse noticed that I had become as white and cold as the hospital walls, so she held my arm and geared me towards the parking lot hospital exit.

“Ms. Ray, you can see your mother again tomorrow morning at eight. The doctor will be available to speak with you then. Have a good night.”

I couldn’t sleep that night. I couldn’t recall the last time I had felt so much. I couldn’t help but remember the strong woman my mother once was.

Chapter 5

“*Ritinha, minha tulipa!*”

“My tulip” was how my mother affectionately called me. In Brazil it is customary to use diminutives as a sign of affection. *Ritinha* was the diminutive of Rita. I never understood my mother's insistence in calling me *Ritinha*. Growing up I had always been a tall child, I was stronger than the other girls and preferred playing sports with boys. My mother constantly praised me for being tough, competitive and intelligent. She persistently stressed the importance of education in my upbringing. She often said “*material possessions are ephemeral, but a college degree lasts a lifetime.*” I grew up being constantly encouraged to study and act with confidence. My mother had little tolerance for mistakes. She urged me to look forward, to dismiss discriminatory comments and to never act like a victim. I was always a survivor—a human being regardless of my gender, race, color or religion. In this manner, when I was growing up, even though I was empowered, I felt there was little room for errors, so I often concealed uncomfortable situations from my mother. I didn't like that she called me *Ritinha*; the nickname did not seem to reflect how big my mother envisioned me.

My mother was into gardening. In fact, she had built a successful landscaping business from scratch. South Florida had a tropical climate and most of her customers came from the temperate north. The high season for her business was from November to April, when the snow birds, those who lived in the North of the United States, came down to South Florida to escape the harsh Northern winter in their second homes. During early spring, her requests for tulips, temperate flowers that bloomed at winter's end, would increase.

“*Ritinha, come over here. I want to show you something special,*” my mother would call me while she was tending to the new fresh bulbs for the early spring. “*These are special flowers. The bulbs sleep, buried in the cold soil, before they grow into tall upright plants. They have confidence in their stems; their beauty can be seen from a distance. Because they have been cared for, they are well prepared and can grow in the coldest conditions. They sprout in early spring, bringing warmth amidst the cold. They blossom brilliantly in April, the same month you were born, Ritinha. You are my most precious tulip, the one I love and have cared for the most.*”

Those words would resonate in my ears in the same way that scoring a goal affected me during a childhood soccer match. I'd kick the ball into the net, I'd feel exhilarated, but quickly it was game on again for me. And what a tough game I played! Although my mother showed affection, there were many things I couldn't understand about her growing up: her secrecy about

the past, her unwillingness to visit or establish a relationship with any relatives in Brazil, her protectiveness towards me and, what was particularly upsetting, her complete disregard for my continuous requests to know about my father.

When we immigrated to the United States, we first settled in Miami, where there was a growing Brazilian community. I remembered Germano, or *Tio* Germano as I called him, a man my mother knew, who had been living in the United States for a while. He owned a small Brazilian restaurant in downtown Miami, where my mother worked cleaning and cooking. At first we lived in a room above the restaurant. Germano was married and had two daughters. I was very fond of them and soon we all went to the same school together. I used to observe him with his daughters, and that reminded me of my father. I remembered missing having a father but I had no recollection of him.

After some time working at the restaurant, my mother was able to rent a small apartment. After we moved, I changed schools and I never saw Germano's daughters again. My mother continued to work at the restaurant while trying to reconcile the increasing demand for her domestic cleaning services. People liked that she was reliable, productive and reserved. Soon word got around and she was being called by many outside the Brazilian community as well. Eventually she quit the restaurant job and devoted herself full-time to cleaning houses.

My mother had a gift with plants. She would take such good care of people's plants while working as a housekeeper that she became known as the "*the Brazilian woman with the green thumb.*" People asked her to take care of their plants when she came to clean. She would spend hours in their gardens, tending to their flowers. She would often bring home vases with plants that looked so frail, almost dead, and within a few days they would be brought back to life. I disliked our tiny one bedroom apartment, which despite being impeccably clean, felt hot and humid like a greenhouse. When there was no space in the apartment to keep so many plants, my mother would take the strong, healthy ones and replant them in her client's gardens. She was very caring when handling them, and every garden she worked on would thrive for a long time. She conversed with the plants, cared for each shrub, bulb and seed as if it was an infant and soon she knew all about gardening in South Florida.

I lived the remainder of my childhood in that downtown run-down Miami apartment complex. I spent the unbearably hot South Florida summers outside, as we didn't have any air-conditioning. I used to bet with the neighborhood boys who could catch more lizards between the concrete structures. I vividly remember one afternoon when I proudly brought home the thirty-seven little lizards that had claimed me victory. When I proudly displayed them to my mother, she turned around, looked at the box full of lizards, approached me and calmly said:

"Ritinha, my tulip, *all life has the birthright to live.* These lizards are alive like you and me. Would you like to live trapped in a box like them?"

I thought of how I detested being in our cramped, hot and humid apartment. My mother made me release all the lizards that day. She made me promise that I would *allow life to live* from that day onwards. I wondered if it was this vow made years ago that brought me back to South Florida again.

That night all I wished for was to hear my mother calling me *Ritinha* once more.

For more information about Born in Rio or to purchase the book, go to:

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