

UNCHOSEN PRIEST

Eduardo Santos

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Chapter 1

THE CHOSEN CHILD

Sweat poured down eleven-year-old Eduardo's face as he raced his skateboard back and forth on the street outside his house. It was a hot, humid morning in Manaus, the capital and largest city of the state of Amazonas in Brazil. The weather is almost always hot and humid on the north bank of the Negro River. Just east of Manaus, at the *Encontro das Águas* (Meeting of the Waters), the dark waters of the Negro River meet the lighter brown waters of the Solimões River and flow parallel to each other as the Amazon River before blending several miles downstream. Eduardo's mother poked her head out the door and called, "Eduardo Ferreira dos Santos! Come in and take a shower before lunch."

Eduardo picked up his skateboard and trudged to the front door. Out of breath, he headed straight for the kitchen. His eagerness to quiet the hunger pangs of a growing boy with a lunch of rice and beans focused his attention. As he made his beeline entry, he failed to notice the stranger sitting in the living room. Eduardo was accustomed to having unfamiliar faces in the house since his mother operated a beauty salon in their home. The customers came seeking manicures and haircuts,

and the family living room also functioned as a waiting room. The stranger's presence did not raise any suspicion in Eduardo's mind.

Before Eduardo could reach his destination, his thirteen-year-old sister, Tatiana slowed his advance. "Sit down and catch your breath." Eduardo took her advice and plopped down on a seat in the room where his sister sat.

Suddenly, a blood-curdling shriek exploded from his throat. "A-a-a-a-a-ahhhh!"

A terrified Tatiana lost all color in her face. She bolted to where their mother was preparing to give a manicure to the stranger. "Come quickly!" she shouted. "Something's happened to Eduardo!"

Their mother abandoned her manicure preparations and rushed to the hallway. Eduardo's body was twisting and squirming on the chair. A low, distorted voice bellowed from his lips. The voice was not his. In guttural tones, the voice said that Eduardo had been chosen to serve the spirits.

Several steps had led Eduardo to this point. When he was twenty months old, he came down with a serious illness. His mother, under the influence of Eduardo's grandmother, an indigenous woman who practiced faith healing, had taken Eduardo to a shaman. During that visit, the shaman told Eduardo's mother he had been chosen. The shaman had threatened Eduardo's mother, telling her that if she did not hand Eduardo over, he would die and the family would be cursed. By the time Eduardo was five, his mother had made a Candomblé robe for him and had taken him to a *terreiro* (temple) to be possessed by the spirits. The priests at the temple had told her that when the time came for Eduardo to be turned over to the spirits, they would give the signal—that moment had arrived.

Eduardo's mother began to bargain. She spoke to the spirit and asked that the spirit communicate more quietly and that the spirit not take her son from her. Then the stranger from the living room came up behind Mother and gently touched her shoulder. "Don't worry," she assured the frantic mother. "Your son has been chosen to be part of our group."

The shocked woman turned to face the stranger. "What do you mean?"

"I am a *mãe de santo* [priestess, lit. mother of saint]," the stranger said. "I am a Candomblé leader."

Eduardo's mother was familiar with Candomblé, a religion that originated among the slaves brought to Brazil from West Africa during the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The slaves blended their traditional beliefs with the Roman Catholicism of their Portuguese slave owners. Candomblé practices the veneration of *orixás* (*orishas*, spirits) that possess worshipers.

The spirit spoke again through Eduardo's lips. The growling voice told his mother that she had two choices. She could either submit to the spirit's demand and turn Eduardo over to the service of the spirits, or his life would be taken. This message terrified her.

"Don't be afraid," the stranger reassured her. "They will treat your son well."

The effects of the spirit possession diminished slowly. However, Eduardo had no memory of the encounter. The event was seared into his mother's memory. The fright and concern motivated her to take the boy to a Candomblé *terreiro* (temple). The *pais dos santos* (priests) welcomed Eduardo like a king. "What an honor," a priest said. "You have been handpicked by a spirit."

"We will prepare you to become a high priest," said another

priest. “Let’s start the *bori* [initiation ritual].” For the initiation ritual, the priests sacrificed a goat, a chicken, and several birds on a stone altar. The ritual involved removing the heads of the animals and pouring the blood from the animals on Eduardo’s head. The priests also took knives and cut Eduardo’s head and back. As the boy bled, the priests drizzled more animal blood over him. Usually, a participant pays for the ritual that the priests perform. However, because a spirit had specifically chosen Eduardo, his mother did not have to pay for the ritual. Not only was there no cost for the ritual, but the priests also supplied the animals for the sacrifices.

During the ceremony, a spirit had again possessed Eduardo. He did not feel any pain. Then the spirit spoke. The spirit demanded that Eduardo drink a glass of blood to seal a pact between him and the other participating spirits. The priests filled a large glass with blood and gave it to Eduardo. When the young man consumed it, the priests led him to another room in the *terreiro* that the priests called the *roncó*, a most holy place reserved for initiations.

“You have to stay here for twenty-one days,” a priest said. “In this room, you will die to your old life and achieve the highest rank in Candomblé. You will be like a god and spend the rest of your life converting people to Candomblé.” At the age of eleven, Eduardo was initiated into the world of Candomblé.

After the twenty-one days, Eduardo left the temple. Before he left, the priests told him that he had an invisible guardian spirit who had been assigned to protect him for the rest of his life. The protection of the spirit, however, did not extend to his family. His family had already had problems due to his father’s alcoholism and the resulting conflict in the home. The conflict had led to Eduardo’s father leaving the home. Now his mother

was losing her only son to the spirits. She tried to negotiate his return home, including petitioning legal authorities, but the priestess who had been at his home had political connections, and her efforts were futile.

By the age of thirteen, Eduardo was already a temple priest. This was not his choice; the spirits had chosen him, and it was essentially forced on him. Tatiana became his temple assistant. Their mother also worshiped at the temple. This way, she could keep an eye on her son and ensure his safety. In his work as a priest, the spirits spoke to and through Eduardo. Among the messages the spirits communicated to Eduardo was a lesson they said should be his top priority. He was never to leave a job unfinished. If he started something, he needed to see it through to completion.

Eduardo conducted rituals and interpreted dreams, all for the fees that the participants would offer him. He taught children to become priests. His main job, however, was to place curses. When he applied a curse, it would result in problems and difficulties for the people and families who were the object of the curse.

However, the spirits limited Eduardo's ability to place curses. They told him he could not curse Protestant Christians, and they elaborated by stating that Protestant Christians had special protection that the spirits could not overcome. They warned Eduardo that if he ever attempted to place a curse on Protestant Christians, all of the spiritual powers that had been afforded to him would be removed from him. The limitation regarding Protestant Christians did not stop at placing curses. The spirit forbade Eduardo from even talking with the Protestants. Eduardo thought this would not be a problem since he did not know anyone of that faith.

Eduardo eventually became a *pai do santo* (priest). His personal life also took on a different dimension. He and his girlfriend, Sidilene de Oliveira, moved in together. There was a ten-year age difference between them. When Eduardo was twenty-eight years old and Sidilene was thirty-eight years old, their family grew with an addition: Eduardo Junior.