

REBORN: THE RED LEDGER - EXCERPT

“Who is the girl?”

Mateus shuffles barefoot toward the sideboard that holds a few bottles of his favorite liquors and a set of cut glasses. His linen clothing hangs loosely on his short and stocky frame. His calm expression and easy movements are perfectly relaxed. He’s at home, appearing so comfortable that I have no choice but to feel at home myself, as much as I ever could.

Part of Mateus’s gift is his ability to put people at ease. That’s also what makes him lethal. No one ever sees him coming.

“No one of importance, as far as I can tell,” I say.

An old girlfriend. I chastise myself for this new fact as a smirk curves Mateus’s cheek.

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?”

He brings me a tumbler of clear liquid muddled with limes. One sniff, and I identify the local brand of cachaça. The essence of sugarcane fills my mouth, but the lime clears it away, inviting me to another taste. I swallow, welcome the sensation, and exhale a sigh.

I close my eyes and think about her taste. The way it consumed me when I had it on my tongue. Then doubt and rational thought wash it away.

When I open my eyes, Mateus is sitting on the adjacent couch watching me. Tan leather cracked with wear and use slides under his palm as he rests it on the arm.

“She is very beautiful,” he says.

I nod. Isabel’s beauty is indisputable. I just wish it was the only thing drawing me to her.

“She looks at you like you are precious to her. I had no idea such a creature could exist in your world.”

I take another swallow and weigh my next words. Everything about this situation is uncomfortable for me. My past is foreign soil, a battleground I’ve never seen before. I’m unarmed and completely unready for it.

“I knew her once,” I finally admit.

“And now you are protecting her?”

“The opposite, actually.”

I don’t need to say any more. Mateus can put the pieces together. He frowns, and his lips form a wrinkled line.

“I see. So why have you brought her here?”

“I need time. She knows things…” I pinch the bridge of my nose, still uncertain how long it’ll take for me to explore this newfound curiosity about my past. “Someone will notice she’s gone soon enough. Probably her boyfriend or her coworkers. Then her family back in the States will know something’s gone wrong. I don’t have much time. You don’t have to worry. We won’t be here long.”

He sweeps his hand in a gesture between us. “You can stay as long as you need to.”

“I won’t make this your mess. Not in your home.”

He lifts an eyebrow and cocks his head. “If you must, you know I will oblige. Even if it costs me this refuge. My debt has not been paid.”

“I’m in no rush for you to pay it.” Calling Mateus’s debt over this would be foolish. I may have left Rio in a rush, but I still have time and space to maneuver.

Mateus sighs heavily. “Perhaps one day, if the devil doesn’t take us too soon, you’ll tell me your story.”

I muster a laugh. “Perhaps if I knew it, I’d tell you.”

Mateus’s eyes soften with understanding. We’ve hardly bared our souls to one another, but he knows my past is beyond reach. Oddly I think he counts my anonymity as an asset to our friendship.

“If your past is dark, how do you know who she is?”

I pause and relive that moment of recognition as she sat in the café this afternoon. Life had been different seconds before.

“She recognizes me. She knows me.” I frown hard. “We were lovers. She hasn’t forgotten, and I have no way of remembering.”

“*Meu Deus*, Tristan! How can you let her go?” Mateus’s cool calm breaks as he leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs.

I shrug. “It’s her or me.”

He curses under his breath and rises to his feet. He crosses the long room, opens a drawer at his desk, and returns.

“Here,” he says, pushing a blackened silver frame into my hands.

I open it like a book, and it parts stiffly. Inside, two ornately trimmed ovals reveal faded photographs. On each side, a woman and a man are dressed in clothing from a couple generations past.

I lift my gaze to him. “Your parents?”

He nods. “My sister raised me. My father opposed the regime, so they burned down our home. My parents were tied down, brutalized while my sister and I sneaked away.

We couldn't save them. Days later, we found this in the rubble. A miracle." He's silent a moment, his gaze on the frame. "Their enemies wanted them to disappear. No body, no voice, no grave beyond the ashes of our home. But this..." He leans in and drops his thick fingertip onto the center of his mother's photograph. "This is a memory they could not destroy."

When he pulls back, I close the frame gently and hand it back to him. "You're lucky to have found it."

He whips it from my grasp. "And you, *idiot*, are lucky to have her. She is your memory. She is your living and breathing miracle." He shakes the frame at me once more before returning it back to his desk, slamming the drawer firmly shut.

He returns and drops on the couch. I marvel at Mateus's break in composure. I've only seen him beyond reason one other time. Those were memories neither of us wished to relive. But this is different. He's emotional over memories he holds. I have nothing like that.

"She's going to get me killed," I finally say. Suddenly, despite everything I've told myself, I know this to be true. Isabel is difficult and impulsive. No reasonable person would leave her life behind on a whim to come with me—a stranger. She's unpredictable and far too attached to the person I once was. And already I can feel her reaching for more.

Mateus rests his empty glass on the table beside him and spins it rhythmically.

"People are always wishing away their bad memories. *Meu Deus, I wish I could forget. Make it go away. Ah!*" He flicks his hand. "They only wish away the pain it

brings them. Me? I would rather die than live as you have, Tristan. Nothing but death to drive you forward. If hers will keep you on this path, you have nothing to live for.”

I hold my teeth together, bearing down against the impact of his words. “And what do you live for? Vengeance? How is that life better?”

Mateus’s expression relaxes a fraction. “Tristan... You are vengeance for hire, for those who don’t have the heart or the *colhões* to pull the trigger themselves.”

I down the rest of my drink and rise to my feet. I pace around the room, chasing the flurry of thoughts that accuse and contradict and provide no true answers. Mateus is perhaps my only friend, and he could be right. If Isabel dies, by my hand or any other, her memories of my life die with her.

I shove my hands through my hair with a pained sound. Why do I fucking care? Living with darkness might not be a life worth living, but it was vastly simpler. Nothing is simple now.

“Tristan.”

I turn as Mateus speaks. His eyes are soft with understanding, but everything else—his posture, the tension that lines his shoulders—speaks of his newfound determination to guide me through this.

“Go to her. She has the answers.”