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ALSO BY EMILIA ARES

*Love and Other Sins*



THE LOVE AND OTHER SINS SERIES

**LOVE**  
*and Other*  
**CAGES**

**EMILIA ARES**



SERA  
PRESS

Love and Other Cages

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“The most beautiful people are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

— ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

*This is for the beautiful people.*

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**LOVE AND OTHER CAGES**  
BY EMILIA ARES

PUB DATE: OCTOBER 15, 2024

**THE NEXT BIG SUSPENSEFUL ROMANTIC THRILLER  
SWEEPS READERS UP IN AN EMOTIONAL  
RIGHT PERSON-WRONG TIME TALE WHERE FAMILY  
DRAMA AND VIOLENCE CLASH IN CONTEMPORARY L.A.**



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“Ares’ prose is both lyrical and evocative, immersing readers in the emotional depths of the story. *Love and Other Cages* is a compelling and poignant exploration of relationships under strain, and I would certainly recommend it to fans of suspenseful romantic thrillers everywhere.”

—Readers’ Favorite



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# CHAPTER 1

# OLIVER

**O**liver Mondell and Oliver Rosales were two different people, and I was both of them.

Oliver Rosales woke up every day wishing he hadn't. Oliver didn't have dreams; all he had was his harsh reality and the nightmares it spawned. He barely slept at all, but that was all right because sleep was a privilege he couldn't afford to risk his life on.

Oliver Mondell slept worse than most but it had nothing on Oliver Rosales' insomnia. The night Oliver Mondell slept in Mina Arkova's room for the first and only time was the best night of sleep he'd had in his miserable life. It was of little consequence that the bed was far too small to fit them both comfortably, or that his left arm had gone entirely numb halfway through the night. They'd been glued together in the same position for so long, both equally reluctant to let go of the bond crystalizing between them. It didn't matter that it was entirely too hot in that house and that he had shed what seemed like a fourth of his body weight in sweat throughout the night.



Because all that mattered to him was that he was with her. When he woke up, Mina Arkova was in his arms—their limbs entwined like the roots of two trees. Despite an especially tumultuous trial of friendship, Mina had made him feel like a whole person in a way he never had before. She had this uncanny way of shining light on all his best parts. He'd revealed the darkest, most repulsive pieces of his past to her—the pieces he kept hidden from the world—and in turn, she'd embraced them with openness and an unconditional love he'd never felt before.

Oliver Rosales didn't have a Mina Arkova in his life. Oliver Rosales didn't even know a Mina Arkova could exist—a person so free of judgment and so full of love that she had the capacity to extend her heart to someone who had been as unfortunate as he had been, and still see hope for him. The only person who'd ever given a damn about Oliver Rosales was a kind and intuitive librarian named Remi, who didn't ignore the warning signs. Remi didn't just throw a life raft to a drowning boy, she jumped into predatory waters and fought beside him to pull him away from harm. Oliver Rosales thought she'd done it out of pity, and pity wasn't love. Pity didn't heal wounds the way love did. And pity didn't make a boy into a man—only self-love could do that.

Oliver Rosales did not love himself. He didn't know how to. When the old librarian's compassion had grown into love, Oliver Rosales still couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it as more than mere commiseration. So, he said goodbye to Oliver Rosales of Santa Clarita, goodbye to Remi, goodbye to every reminder of his old life. He shed that skin and became Oliver Mondell of Los Angeles—the blank slate, the entrepreneur, the hopeful one.

In Los Angeles, Oliver Mondell slowly began to weave a web in his brain that bridged mere survival to self-acceptance to self-love. Every successful business interaction, every rent

check paid on time, every purchase made, every good grade, every smile from Mina Arkova contributed to that bridge.

Last night, that bridge was brought to near completion because each time he cut open his chest to reveal the oozing tar inside and spoke of his abuse aloud to Mina, she continued to smile that healing smile at him. Only now, it was with deeper understanding of all he'd endured. The bridge grew thick, and its supports more intricate.

One day, Oliver Mondell would come to terms with the fact that Oliver Rosales deserved to be loved—by others and himself. But for now, he was far too pleased, waking up with his arms around the most perfect girl he'd ever known. A girl who'd gotten a glimpse of the festering wounds beneath his well-camouflaged bandages and loved him for them, not despite them. A girl whose delicate, slender fingers draped across his chest, effortlessly elegant even in sleep. A girl whose powerful thigh rested heavily over the center of his body, grounding him under the weight of her potential energy. A girl whose round, parted lips funneled a gentle caress of breath against the skin of his neck. His girl.

This moment couldn't exist in Oliver Rosales' wildest dreams. This moment would never be possible again in Oliver Mondell's worst nightmares.

## CHAPTER 2

### MINA

**Y**esterday, I hit bedrock. Today, I was soaring for the stratosphere.

I recalled the nearly indiscernible flicker of fear that flashed in Oliver's eyes as he finally revealed his heart-breaking secret to me last night. When someone you fall for unlocks their Fort Knox of a chest, pulls out their own beating heart, and places it into your open palms, you're supposed to handle it gently. Especially when that someone is as guarded as Oliver. *Don't crush me*, Oliver's gaze seemed to plead as he bestowed his trust on me.

I had run down to the kitchen to distract my mother, hugging her tightly so she wouldn't turn and see what I saw through the window—Oliver jumping lightly from the tree onto the ground. I continued clinging to Mama, stubbornly holding her face against mine as the beautiful dark angel who had crept silently from my bedroom window made his escape.

I watched Oliver disappear safely, my heart in my throat. As Mama pulled back, she cupped my face between her palms and

furrowed her brows, sensing something was off. A thick coat of guilt oozed over me, sticky and unwelcome.

I promised myself this would be the last time I kept something from her. No more lies between us. No more half-truths or secrets. I needed things to get back to normal.

“We are okay, *babychka*. *Minachka*, nothing can ever changing our bond. Loving you, always, no matter the what,” Mama reassured, pressing her lips against my forehead before pulling me back into a tight embrace.

“Your pronunciation is getting so good, *Mamachka*! Remember how you used to say ‘always’ instead of always and ‘no matter the vaat’ instead of what? You can drop the ‘the’ by the way,” I suggested.

“Huh?” She knitted her brows.

“Never mind, it’s perfect. You’re perfect.” I nestled into her, wishing I could sink further into the cocoon of her love. She always did know my every thought without me having to verbalize it. From now on, I would tell her everything. The way I always had. The way she deserved. We would be okay—we had to be. We were the only family we had around here.

Reparations would not likely go as smoothly with Nyah. My hands were itching to call my best friend—to grovel, apologize, beg for forgiveness even though I already did that last night. But one more time wouldn’t hurt, just to be sure she knew how sorry I was. It was the least she deserved after what I put her through at that stupid party.



I was upstairs when I heard it—the sound that turned my entire world off-kilter.

*Thunk.* I jumped, startled by the sound of muffled reports and a loud crash. *What the hell was that?*

Instinctively, I crouched as I rushed over to my window and

peered outside. My throat tightened in horror as I saw it—a huge, shiny black SUV in our driveway, blocking in Mama’s car. *Who are they? What do they want?* I heard a sound that made my blood run cold. Muffled male voices, coming from the room directly below mine. The kitchen. *My God, they’re INSIDE the house,* I thought in a panic. Cell phone, I told myself, trying to control the wave of panic rising in my throat. I raced to the bed and pulled off the covers, feeling around for my phone. The male voices were coming from another room now. There was a violent clatter. I froze—petrified. The walls rotated around me as my breathing became shallower and shallower. My feet turned to lead. I needed to do something—hide, find a weapon, *anything.*

*Loving you, always.* Mama’s voice echoed through my head. Inching my way carefully to the door, I dialed 911 with one hand and braced against the doorframe with the other as I checked the stairwell to make sure it was clear. I dashed into Mama’s room as quietly as I could. She needed me, fast, that much I knew. But running downstairs without a weapon or any backup would be stupid.

“911. What is your emergency?” I could barely make out the operator through the pounding in my ears.

“There are men here...we’re being attacked in our house,” I hissed through my teeth. “I think they have guns and they’re here to hurt us. Please hurry,” I urged.

“Okay, honey, I’m gonna get help out to you right now. Stay on the line while I pull up your location.” I heard her keyboard clacking furiously. “What’s your name, hon? You said the men are still in your house?”

“My name is Mina,” I whispered, straining to make out the voices downstairs. “Yes, they’re downstairs in the kitchen.” Did they have Mama? Or had she hidden?

“And you said they had guns? Do you know how many weapons there are?”

## NOT FOR SALE

“No, I mean—at least one. Probably more. They’re downstairs in the kitchen—I think they might have my mother.”

“And where in the house are you? Is it somewhere you can stay hidden?” I knew she was trained to stay calm, but the lack of urgency in her voice made me want to scream.

“In my mother’s room,” I murmured.

“Okay, good. Stay hidden. Do not make any noise. You’re doing great, Mina. Help will arrive shortly, I promise you. Remember. Stay hidden. You said your mom was downstairs?”

“Yes.” I heard an explosion of voices then, men’s voices shouting, and another voice—Mama’s, barking back at them. I felt a wave of nausea hit my stomach. They had her. I stood up shakily, steeling myself to go down and fight for her.

“They have my mother,” I said, my voice rising with panic. “I have to do something...they’re going to hurt her!”

“Mina, stay with me, okay? Don’t move. Stay where you are and hide until help arrives. I’ll stay on the line with you, just hold on...”

I crept deeper into Mama’s room, almost tripping over the open suitcase and the piles of clothes scattered around the floor. I located the pocketknife she kept in her purse on the nightstand. I palmed it, and pressed the button that released the blade. *There’s a crowbar in her closet*, I remembered. “*For keeping the creeps humble*,” Mama would always say, laughing. As I quietly rummaged through the closet, I glanced back at the door, but the sounds of struggle continued. Mama was putting up one hell of a fight, the image of which made my hands shake violently. My heart was hammering in my chest and sweat coated my palms, but I managed to wrap my fingers around the crowbar. Still shaking, I dashed back to my room on the tips of my socked toes.

If they caught me on the stairs, it would be over. *Head-to-head, brute strength would win*. The only way out of this was to take them by surprise. I knew I only had one option. I dangled a

leg out of my window, reaching for the closest branch of the tree. *This is it.* With trembling hands, I gripped the largest branch of the tree for dear life as I shifted my full weight over and mapped my descent. I had to be quick, or they'd spot me. The crowbar was tucked into the back of my shorts and scraped a painful path along my skin as I hung down and stretched my leg out, feeling for the next step, but couldn't land on anything solid.

Instead, I hung, suspended in the air, aiming for the branch below. I let go, landing with a violent crack. The crowbar fell out of its tuck and landed in the grass with a heavy thud. I scooted in toward the trunk of the tree, inch by inch until my legs found footing on another branch below. I kept descending until finally I was all the way down. I felt around for the crowbar and ran for the front of the house.

I saw no driver in the SUV, so I gambled my luck on everyone being inside. Our front door was standing wide open. I crouched and crawled up to the front steps, making sure to stay low.

"I told you there's no one else here! Why are you dragging me up the stairs?" I heard Mama scream. I knew that she was screaming not in an automatic terror response, but to communicate her position to me. Taking a deep, ragged breath, I crept through the open door and stepped behind a planter, squinting as my eyes adjusted to the scene in front of me. Two men were dragging my mother up the stairs. One had her around the waist, and the other was struggling to keep hold of her legs, which kept bucking and kicking him. Neither of them had spotted me yet. She almost broke loose for a moment, and when I caught sight of blood smeared across her face, a hot, pulsing anger exploded in my chest. I choked back an animalistic growl and lunged, waving the crowbar high over my head.

A scream tore through my vocal cords as I connected with the back of the first man's skull, a heavy *thwack* sounding in the

## NOT FOR SALE

air. He lurched off-balance then catapulted toward me, hitting me at hip-level and taking me down the stairs with him. Pain erupted through my body as I hit the floor and felt him land on top of me. I braced myself for his attack, but quickly realized his body was limp. A warm, sticky moisture coated my hands and face. Blood. I bellowed and grunted as I shoved his unmoving body off of me and staggered back to Mama and the second man, who held her in a chokehold at the top of the stairs.

“*Bizhi, Mina!*” she barked out hoarsely. *But I can’t run, Mama, I can hardly see.* I must have hit my head when the oversized creep knocked me down. I blinked over and over, but everything was a blur of burning red. I couldn’t hear past the ringing in my skull. I felt around me frantically, half deaf and partially blind. I put my hands up and grabbed the banister to steady me. The whole house felt like it was spinning and only the staircase was holding me up. “Mina,” Mama croaked, her voice breaking this time.

She sounded so weak; her voice was all wrong. *I have to get to her.* Pulling myself upright by the banister, I nudged the limp mammoth of a man with my foot to make sure he was still unconscious.

“Mina,” Mama tried again, her eyes focusing on the floor to my left. “*Ya pnula yego pistolet.*” *His gun!* She’d kicked away his gun. I spotted something metallic at the foot of the stairs, and when I looked back at her, she gave me a nearly imperceptible nod before kicking and punching her captor with all her might. I took the opportunity and reached down, fingers wrapping around the metal.

*Thunk.* I stilled at the sickening crack. I forced my head up just in time to watch the cretin smash Mama into the stairwell wall again. A sob tore through me as she went limp and silent. Blood began to pool on the stairs from an ugly gaping wound on her head.

I stood shakily, training the gun on the man crouching over



her. I squinted, fighting to focus on the bulk of him as he hid like a coward behind Mama's limp body. Would I be able to shoot the bastard without hitting Mama?

"Please," I hissed through my teeth. "Just let her go. You can take whatever you want—just let her go."

The man made an ugly laughing sound, then grabbed Mama's hair and dragged her back toward him, positioning her more securely as a shield in front of him.

"Stop!" I screamed.

"You better drop that gun, little girl," he said, flashing a menacing grin. He had a sharp chin, a nose like a hook, and salt and pepper hair. As he dragged her up the stairs, she let out a cry of pain, and her hands shot up to grab his wrists.

"Stop it!" I bellowed. Fury boiled deep in my belly. "I'll kill you. I swear it." I stood up on shaking legs, ignoring the sharp pain cutting through my ankle. I fired a warning shot into the ceiling to let him know I meant business, then aimed the gun back down at him, unflinching.

My blood had turned to ice. My whole body felt like it was shrinking. I couldn't feel my legs beneath me, and I was beginning to hyperventilate, desperate for the room to stop spinning.

"Calm down, bitch!" he barked.

The command was so ridiculous I almost laughed.

"You're telling me to calm down? You have my mother's life in your hands, you piece of shit. And if you hadn't noticed, I have a gun pointed at your head. I'll kill you and I won't bat an eye! Now, let...her go." I clenched my teeth, my heart racing so fast that my chest throbbed in pain. Just as I focused my sights on his head and he tried to crouch behind her, the sound of sirens blared through the streets behind me, growing louder and closer by the second. The man's eyes frantically darted between the gun and the door.

"Screw this," he spat, using the distraction of the sirens to release Mama, lifting and practically throwing her down the

stairs at me, as he turned to make his escape. I dropped the gun and launched my body forward, desperate to break her fall, but her head cracked against the stairway wall before I could catch her. She landed in my arms as limp as a rag doll. From the corner of my vision, I could see her attacker racing into my room, but my only thoughts now were for my mother.

As I held Mama and tried to figure out where the blood was coming from to stop it, a booming voice cut through the sirens. “LAPD. Everybody on the ground!”

Ignoring them, I kept my gaze trained on her. “I’m here, Mama, I’m here. I’m here,” I chanted to her in a whisper.

“Hands in the air!” the same voice bellowed.

“Stay with me, Mama. Stay with me. Stay with me. I love you. Stay with me.” I cried out in a prayer to God because she wasn’t drifting anymore; her eyes were closed. Her chest was still, no longer rising and falling.

She was gone.

## CHAPTER 3

# OLIVER

“**W**hat do you mean Led Zeppelin’s the greatest band of all time? Ever heard of the...Beatles?” I argued, pinned under Xavi as the six-minute buzzer went off, marking the end of our jiu-jitsu round. I was seriously regretting coming into the dojo today. I was having trouble focusing on anything other than the invading memory of Mina’s thighs wrapped around my waist in her room this morning. After I snuck across her yard and back to my van, I drove to work but couldn’t focus on a damn thing, so I rode my motorcycle over here, hoping to expend my pent-up energy.

Xavi released his hold and stood from his mount, offering me a hand up. We shook hands and separated, catching our breath before assuming sparring stances across from each other on the mats, preparing for the next round. I’d lost the last three rounds. It wasn’t even close. I was panting like a pug but a stupid smile kept creeping up the corners of my mouth.

“That was an easy nine points, third time in a row...where’s your head at, Oli? Also, the Beatles? Really? Of all the bands? I

## NOT FOR SALE

didn't take you for a Beatles fan...ah!" The buzzer went off and Xavi cried out as I went for the takedown. He managed to stay on his feet. I took him down with a sweep to the back of his leg that he didn't see coming.

Xavi was a tall Filipino-Brazilian-American seemingly built of pure steel, with jiu-jitsu superiority clearly running in his veins. He didn't mess around. This guy was usually top of the class unless a more experienced brown belt happened to be visiting. He'd been training since he was a kid. We were of similar build, but he was much more skilled and had clocked more hours on the mat than I could ever rack up, even with the way I'd been tripling my time commitment at the dojo lately.

I positioned myself over him quickly, locking his arms and legs in a bind. "Nice! Y-you w-weasel," he hissed through gritted teeth as he tried to maintain his composure. I knew he was hurting because binding him this way was especially taxing on my own forearms and shins. After some struggle, he had me off-balance with a powerful hip thrust and used the momentum to flip me. He was in the dominant position now. I racked my brain for my next maneuver, but he was anticipating all my moves and blocking them so well that I couldn't help but let out a chuckle at my hopelessness. Amusement was a welcome change of emotions; it granted a flexibility that anger could never allow. My grin grew wider as a calm spread through me—a balm for the jagged ridges of maneuvers mapping paths through my mind.

"You feeling okay? You're usually pissed when I have you pinned on your back," Xavi teased.

"That's cuz you don't stink as much as usual," I managed to grumble, all the while working to slip my elbow out from under his bind. "So, my mind's not fogging over from the reek. Maybe you've lost your edge, Xavi," I fired back, shifting my weight to my right side and sliding out from under him. As soon as I was

out, I wrapped my legs and arms around his back while he was still on all fours.

Xavi faltered for a moment but flipped me off his back and onto the mat seconds later. He reasserted his dominance. “Lost my edge? That’s rich from the guy who can’t stay out from under me.”

“Can’t I?” I groaned and tried once more to slip from under him, but his pin was airtight now, inescapable. I thrust my hips up to shift him off me just as the reset buzzer went off again.

“Shit,” I muttered, defeated. Xavi had already lightened his bind, but we both lay there a few moments longer, panting like dogs in the heat. Instead of torturing myself mentally and considering the other strategies I could’ve tried like I usually did when he defeated me, it was the memory of Mina’s profile as she rested her cheek against my chest that came to my mind like a prophecy and a prayer. I was almost overcome with the feeling I’d had when I awoke this morning with her in my arms. The soft skin of her shoulder pressed into the nook of my underarm, the curve of her waist beneath my fingertips, the smell of her temple ingrained in my memory, filling me up like the feeling of home.

Xavi hopped off me, holding out his hand and chuckling. “What are you so happy about? You just had your ass handed to you. You’re lying there like a princess with some goofy smile on your face. You high right now?”

“Naw.” I took his hand and stood, hoping I wasn’t blushing red. I followed Xavi toward the bleachers, where we both plopped down. “I’m high on life.”

“High on life? Someone give you a rusty trombone last night?”

“Do I even want to know what that is?”

“Use your imagination.” Xavi waggled his brows suggestively and I shoved him.

“Don’t be nasty,” I joked, shaking my head. But after a

moment, the urge to share something about Mina became even stronger. Every sense in my body was on overload, like my entire system was quivering. If I didn't tell somebody *something* about her soon, I might actually explode right here in this dojo. *Slow your roll*, I cautioned myself. *You're not the guy who vomits his feelings—that's just not you, man.*

I shook my head clear, ignoring the warning and nudging Xavi with my right foot. "Hey, so remember that girl I was telling you about?"

"The one who friend-zoned you? The dancer?" Xavi asked.

I chuckled, remembering opening up to him about that when Mina and I were going through the thick of it a few weeks back. "Yeah, her," I said, grinning wider than I meant to.

His smile grew too as he raised his eyebrows. "Nooooo!" Xavi's grin matched mine. "Dog, you hit that?"

"Naw, not like that. It's just that...I mean, we kind of made it official. We're like, boyfriend/girlfriend. She's my girl now," I confirmed, almost more to convince myself it was really true. *She's my girl.*

"For real? Congrats, my man. I'm happy for you," Xavi said, gripping my shoulder with a massive hand.

"Thanks." I shrugged him off casually.

"Yo, lemme see a pic." Xavi gestured to my phone.

"A pic?"

"Of your girl, what's her name?"

"Uh, Mina. A pic..." I exhaled, looking through my phone for photos, scanning image after image of what was mostly electronics for work and screenshots of receipts. "I guess I don't really have any pictures of her."

"What's her handle?" Xavi asked, pulling out his phone.

"I don't know," I replied, genuinely unsure. "I actually don't have a profile."

"Don't tell me you're one of those anti-social media people," he said.

“No, it’s nothing like that. I just never really bothered with it, I guess.” The truth was the lawyers warned us about our digital footprint, and how the opposing counsel could use information gathered about us in our case.

“Seriously? That’s rare these days.”

“Is it? Oh here—” I scrolled to a picture I took of Mina jumping midair the day she invited me to watch her dance at the studio. I hesitated showing him, but figured *What the hell?* Sharing something precious to me...that had to be part of my growth. Right? I rotated the screen out to him. He took it from me and brought it closer to his face.

“Holy shit. She’s hot.”

“Yeah, she is.”

I grabbed the phone back just before he tried to zoom in.

“Nice try. Wipe the drool,” I joked, cramming the phone into my pocket.

“Easy there, tiger.” Xavi grinned.

“Can’t help it.”

“Having seen that pic, I can’t say I blame you. So, what’s up? Gonna go see her now?” Xavi asked.

I ran a hand over the back of my head, contemplating. I was dying to see her, but I knew I should give her some space. She needed bonding time with her mom to make up for running away from home again yesterday.

“I wanna, but I dunno what her plans are. What about you? Doing anything today? Wanna grab a quick bite?” I asked him.

Xavi paused, then said, “My man, I’d love to. But I’m sorta tight on cash right now.”

“I’ll spot you, no worries,” I insisted.

“Naw, I couldn’t let you do that. I gotta work anyway.”

“Where do you work? You need a ride?” I offered.

“Naw, thanks anyway. I work here.”

“For real? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, Master Rig’s the man. He hooked it up for me. He lets

me train for free and in exchange, I help him out here and there,” he explained.

“Nice.” My eyes traced down to his duffle bag. It was big, too big for just his training gear. I realized what it could mean. I knew what it looked like when someone’s whole life was in one bag. Xavi might not have a permanent living situation, I realized, and the thought gutted me. I recalled my stupid comment from earlier when we were sparring, and I felt a pang of regret. “Ey, I’m sorry about that joke I made.”

“What joke? No worries, shit I don’t even remember what you said.”

He followed my gaze, shooting a glance toward his bag. He shook his head. “Oh, no. It’s just temporary.”

“If you ever need a place to crash, let me know,” I offered.

“Thank you for the offer, Oliver. I appreciate that. I’m staying at a homey’s place right now actually, but yeah...no. I’ll, umm...I’ve got a better job lined up—just hard to get hired without references and shit.”

“I’m serious, Xavi. Here, I’ll text you my address. If you ever need to crash, just come by, okay? Anytime. There’s plenty of room,” I insisted. “I’ve been there. You just gotta be smarter than me and accept the help. If you need some extra cash, uh, I can...I uh, I deal with electronics resale. I could actually use some help from time to time.”

Xavi’s shoulders perked up at the offer. I nodded, mirroring his excitement at the prospect of working together.

“Electronics resale? What’s that mean?” he asked.

“Like a hustle. Buying and selling,” I explained.

Xavi’s eyebrows drew together and he quickly shook his head. “Oh, nah. I don’t wanna do nothin’ illegal. Thanks for looking out though.” He raised his palms.

“Not illegal. I buy from Craigslist and sell to exporters. But lately, I’ve been expanding to sales online, and I got some direct



accounts set up with the retailers. You any good on a computer?”

Xavi laughed suddenly. “For real? I am, actually. I taught myself to code. Plus, I’m a video game junkie.” He lit up.

“Well, see—that’s perfect. I need something way simpler. Just responding to customers, answering questions, keeping prices on listings competitive, posting product pics, listing SKUs...just basic stuff, packing and shipping,” I explained, hoping I wasn’t getting ahead of myself. I hadn’t fully thought this through. *Am I ready to bring someone else on board?* The only thing I cared about right then was helping him.

“Umm, I dunno what to say, man. That sounds perfect. You sure?” he asked, his eyes bright.

“Hell yeah, I’m sure. You’d be helping me out.”

“How much you paying?” Xavi asked.

“Ugh.” I laughed, uncertain how to answer. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. “We can check online for comparable positions at other tech companies. I’ll match the going rate.”

He laughed too, rubbing the top of his head like he was still trying to process his unexpected good luck. “This is crazy...I’m excited.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said.

“When do I start?”

“Lemme see what Mina has planned today. Either way, we’ll figure it out. I’ll hit you up. Maybe you can come by after you’re finished here? I’ll show you around and order pizza or whatever you’re feeling like,” I offered.

“Sounds perfect, man.” He shook his head, and I thought I heard a mumbled “Wow” as he walked away.

After I toweled off and changed, I grabbed my bag and headed for the door. Xavi was still in the practice area, mopping the floors.

“All right.” I patted his back. “See you later, man.”

NOT FOR SALE

“Later, brother,” he said. There were relief and joy in his voice. My heart squeezed at the sound of that. *Brother*.

As I walked out of the dojo, still sporting my shit-eating grin, my phone buzzed. My smile stretched even wider when I saw the name on my screen. *MINA*. I answered almost immediately.

“Hey, baby. I was just going to call y—”

“Oli,” she breathed. Voice weak, broken. My grin drained from my face.

“Mina? What is it? What’s wrong?” I pressed the phone harder against my ear, trying to gauge every microscopic sound she produced.

“The men. Th-they came back.”