

ADVANCE REVIEW COPY

NOT FOR SALE

LOVE
and Other
SINS

EMILIA ARES

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Love and Other Sins

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For Slava, Mila, and Sofia

Finally... Always

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And I think that's how the best relationships start—you're not looking for anything and suddenly, you have something.

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PROLOGUE

Never let your guard down, *I scolded myself. How could I have let my guard down?*

I jerked my arms away violently but failed to slip out of his iron grasp, unaware as I gasped for air that I was only further perpetuating my own hyperventilation.

I parted my trembling lips, paralyzed with fear, trying to scream for help but not managing even a whisper. Heat circulated from my stomach to my chest and back down again. Clutching my shoulders, he propped me against the alley wall. My breathing became rapid and wild. This can't be happening to me. How could I be so stupid?

My instincts finally kicked in. I made the only move I could.

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CHAPTER 1

MINA

Heathcliff had knelt on one knee to embrace her—

Hey, I noticed you always sit here. You got dibs on this spot?" said a muffled male voice.

I put my Emily Brontë audiobook on pause, sliding my headphones partially off my ears, and glanced up to find a guy looking down at me. It didn't get more surfer dude than him: Vans, shaggy sideswept hair, and the twitch he made at five-second intervals to propel said hair out of his face. Dibs? I was sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall at the rear of the school. I went there because it was peaceful and quiet. So yes, technically speaking, I guess I had dibs on the spot.

"Nope," I replied, nudging my headphones back into place. I rewound and resumed.

Heathcliff had knelt on one knee to embrace her; he attempted to rise, but—

"Sweet. I dig the view from here, actually. You're Mina, right? I'm Tyler. You always have headphones on, so I never get a chance to say wassup. Hey, did you go to Paul Revere Middle School?"

I felt a ripple of irritation rising in my throat. I took a breath and slid the headphones off again.

Just answer the question, I told myself. It's not a big deal. Think likeable thoughts. Try to smile. "Nice to meet you, Tyler. No, actually, I didn't go

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to Revere.” I lingered to see if he was looking for more of a conversation, but he was suddenly preoccupied, typing on his phone in haste. I returned to *Wuthering Heights*.

Heathcliff had knelt on one knee to embrace her; he attempted to rise, but she seized his hair, and—

“Hey, can you believe she’s making the AP Calc final cumulative?”

Pause. I looked up at him through lowered lashes, not because I was trying to flirt, but because I thought it might hide the aggravation I felt. “The actual AP test was yesterday, and that was cumulative, so it shouldn’t matter if the final is cumulative.”

“Yeah, but her exams are harder than the AP exam,” he said.

“You think?”

He rolled his eyes. “Show-off.”

I chuckled. “I’m sorry, but if I’m being honest, I don’t actually recognize you from class.”

“Hold on,” he said, then began to pull a Clark Kent—literally. He slid a pair of reading glasses from his pocket and put them on. Then he swept his hair back into a ponytail with one hand, transforming himself into someone more familiar.

“Wow, that’s funny; I recognize you now. So what’s with the alternate look, then? Trying to fit in with the surf team, or practicing for the witness protection program?”

He released his hair and snapped his head back and forth as if to assuage it.

“This isn’t a look; it’s how I always dress. I just change my vibe for certain classes. Yeah, I am on the surf team, and teachers judge us. I’m automatically a space cadet and a stoner to them—an instant C average. But add some fake reading glasses, an ugly-ass sweater, and a little hair product, and suddenly they see someone focused, hardworking, and deserving of a good grade.”

“Come on, that’s not a thing!” I said, shaking my head. “You’re kidding, right? You think that works?”

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Like a magician mid-performance, he pulled a knit sweater vest from his backpack and shrugged into it, then tucked loose strands of hair behind his ears and cocked his head, staring earnestly at me through his glasses.

“Mr. Booth? Will there be an extra credit assignment for this unit?” he asked flatly.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I realized he was as serious as a briefcase—the only item missing from his getup. He laughed too, and I began to wonder about him. *Maybe not so irritating after all*, I mused. He was funny and cute—why had I never talked to him before?

Well, because I didn’t talk to anyone at school unless I had to. So why was he suddenly talking to me?

The sweet moment of laughter passed all too soon, followed by a whole lot of silence. I shifted my legs, suddenly self-conscious. My finger itched to resume the audiobook, desperate to discover what happened after Cathy seized Heathcliff’s hair. But back in the real world, Tyler investigated further. “So where are you from?”

“I take the bus from Hollywood.”

“No, I mean, where are you really from, like, originally? I remember your last name is something foreign.”

So much for the woke youth of modern America honoring the culturally heterogenous scope of their fellow citizens. Anything approaching exotic facial features or an unfamiliar name still garnered you the age-old question, “So what are you?”

“Um, you mean, like, my parents?” I made sure the distinction was clear. “Well, my parents are from Russia.”

“That’s what I thought! No wonder you’re always so serious and stiff.”

I stifled a sigh. “That’s not a thing.”

“Hell yeah it is,” he intoned, yanking off his placebo glasses and flipping his hair. “I would know. Russians are always serious and never

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smile—well, the dudes, at least. The chicks are hot but bitchy, open-minded, and always packin' vodka—in which case, can I have some?"

Is he joking? I wasn't sure whether to laugh or be offended. *Keep it light, Mina. Smile.* "You sure love your overgeneralizations, don't you? A word of advice: don't drink the Kool-Aid."

"No, it's true!" he pressed. "Look, I can prove it. Don't your parents drive a Benz or a Beemer? Maybe one of each? Your dad's a big, scary dude who runs a bunch of other big, scary dudes. I mean, tuition here is pricey, am I right?"

This was why I don't talk to people. They tend to get real disappointing real fast. I'd officially lost interest in the conversation. "You should stop now."

"No, I got this—he's in insurance—an accident lawyer?" he snickered at his own joke, and there was an undertone of unpleasantness to it that brought my guard firmly up.

I made a monosyllabic sound of disgust and flipped him off.

"Oh, come on, lighten up, comrade! I'm just messing with you. It's called a joke. Joke-avitch! Like from Humorstan! But seriously, do you have a shit-ton of guns at home? Can you hook me up with a Kalashnikov?"

No meant no, dude. "A for effort, okay?" I snapped. "You're, like, practically a Rhodes scholar. Congratulations on getting through *Stereotypes for Dummies* in one sitting."

I yanked off my headphones and shoved them into my book bag, tucking my physics book under one arm as I pushed myself to my feet.

"Hey, don't go," Tyler protested, holding up one hand. "I'm not trying to be shady. I was just trying to work up the nerve to ask you something. Would you ever want to maybe . . ."

He glanced around then leaned closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Hook me up with a mail-order bae?"

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I shoved him as he began cackling with laughter. “Is it true Ukrainian chicks will do anything to move to America? See, I know there’s a difference between Russians and Ukrainians.”

“Yeah, you’re woke as hell. My bad.” I went to walk around him, but he stepped into my path.

“Aw, don’t get all salty! We can still hook up when I’m married to Katerina. She’ll just take care of the guaranteed blowies, like an—”

I smacked his arm with my very heavy physics book, called him a waste of space, and started to walk away. A group of his eavesdropping buddies came out of hiding from around the corner, roaring with laughter as I marched past.

“Damn! She got you, waste of space! You owe me five bucks, Tyler! You thought she’d get through five minutes of negging? That chick?” one of them taunted, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Blood rushed to my face as I walked away, acting as if I couldn’t hear. Things started spilling out of my still-unzipped backpack, and I stopped and bent to pick them up, swearing under my breath.

“Dude, she lasted, like, less than a minute, plus smacked him, plus cursed him out! This must be a new record! It’s official: Russian chicks are un-neggable, the reigning neg champions!” said Surf Team Clone #2.

I shot him a poisonous look.

Like the rest of his buddies, he was still sporting the bottom half of his wetsuit from the early morning team meet. Did they really think keeping those suits on all day was going to help them get laid?

“Brah, that was most definitely longer than a minute!” Tyler argued.

I stuffed my things back into my pack and stood up.

“Nah, don’t even try. I got the whole thing on video! I’m gonna Boomerang a slo-mo of her smacking you to that one song . . . ‘Be Careful’—shit’s gonna go viral!”

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Livid, I spun around to find Surf Team Clone #2 waving his phone around like a demented man-baby. Weren't surfers supposed to be Zen and into recycling and saving the planet? Was I confusing surfers with Silverlake hipsters? I considered smacking the moron's phone right out of his overprivileged hand, but it was pointless; he likely had a cloud backup.

I turned on my heel and stalked off. Why did I blow up on him like that in the first place? I think the final straw was when he unintentionally named his imaginary Ukrainian sex slave after my *babushka*. The moral of the story? I could be violent and short-tempered, and left unchecked, I might at times perpetuate the angry Russian stereotype; but my intentions were good.

• • •

On the bus ride home from school, I scolded myself for losing my temper. Why had I let that over-tanned tapeworm rattle me? *You don't know how to handle drama because you've gotten so good at avoiding it*, I told myself, *keeping to yourself and living vicariously through the characters of your favorite books*. It sounded boring, I knew, but as far as solutions went, it had been a solid option for me—as efficient and predictable as my bus commute.

Public transportation wasn't the worst thing in the world, except for the countless stops, the rigid seats, and the prevailing stench—eau de marinated urine and stale air. On the upside, the public transportation experience was an unwavering source of motivation to work tirelessly and excel, and hence graduate to some form of private transportation, never to return to mass transit again.

Transportation notwithstanding, this was the last week of my junior year of high school—the last week I would ever attend a private school in Pacific Palisades. I was going to be making a big change for my senior

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year. I needed to transfer somewhere with some socioeconomic and ethnic diversity—somewhere grittier, more down-to-earth, more . . . real, where the neoprene-clad Cro-Magnon boys of the world were just one sweater-vest and pair of glasses away from the honor roll. Pacific Palisades had been a pretty bubble and looked great on a college application, but I couldn't spend another minute stuck in traffic on the I-10 at five in the morning. *Even the coast road gets old when you've been stuck on it for an hour every day three years running*, I told myself. Then I laughed ruefully and shook my head. Who was I kidding? The Pacific coast never got old, and I wasn't especially jonesing for more grit. The reality was my mother had lost one of her jobs and couldn't afford the tuition anymore. I was trying to focus on the positives.

Luckily, I hadn't put any effort into building lasting relationships that would complicate my transfer to a public school in Hollywood. How's that for a positive? Instead of a social life, I opted for a competitive GPA and a nearly perfect SAT score. Did I want to join Rafael Midoci's "study group" cult at the local village coffee shop every Thursday? Sure, why not? Did I want to go to Bianca Ramirez's "Kick Off the Summer" pool party last week? Of course I did! Did I want to go sailing on Troy Demur's family yacht? Who wouldn't? Was I invited to any of those things? Well, no. I was not. But surely if I'd put as much energy into smiling at people as I did into my grades, the invites would have started rolling in, right? Time was an investment, and I had chosen to bury all my capital in academics. Which meant if I wasn't accepted to one of my top-choice universities, I'd have committed social suicide for nothing, and the injustice of the world would shift our globe off its axis, hurtling us all into space to our inevitable deaths.

Back to Tyler—it was a shame, really. Sometimes, there would be a finely wrapped package covered in exquisite lace and rococo paper, but inside was a steaming heap of shit. You'd be looking around wondering,

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what's that smell? And sometimes it turned out to be nothing but a big old box of Tyler, tied in a shiny bow.

The scenery outside the window changed from shrubs to ocean as the bus turned left onto the Pacific Coast Highway. This short stretch of the coast was my favorite part of the ride home. I stared entranced as sunlight danced on the water, illuminating a path of silver all the way to the horizon. I'd have been happy doing nothing but looking at that view all day, except for the fact that I wouldn't have. Every second of the three years I spent slaving over my homework had been to give myself options in the future—to pave the way for me to choose what I wanted out of life, and not the other way around.

Beyond the whole paving metaphor, things were considerably murkier. I knew much more about what I didn't want in life than about what I did. I knew I didn't want to become some lonely professional with nothing but a collection of exotic cats and dry-cleaned, color-coded business suits waiting for me at home. How exactly did one safeguard against that? I guess I'd just have to casually stumble upon a sexually explosive yet emotionally stable relationship with a good *bad boy*. Maybe by then there would be an app for that.

I said goodbye to my final glimpse of the coast as the view abruptly went black. As we drove eastbound through a long tunnel that turned into the I-10, I held my breath but made no wish. An image came to me: a man standing just inside our front door, dressed in a navy wool coat with a cashmere scarf draped around his neck and passport in hand. Next to him sat a large, ungainly Saran-wrapped piece of luggage. It was clear from the size of his bag and the heft of his coat that he wasn't just leaving us; he was leaving the country, flying somewhere cold. His sad eyes were apologetic, but the ridge of his mouth was set in a hard, angry line. I didn't know it then, but that would be the last time I ever saw my father. The memory was like an aching tooth. I shut out the pain and hoped it

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went away on its own, but what if the tooth had gone rotten inside? I pulled my backpack in tightly against my abdomen, like this would plug the void and hold me together.

The bus screeched to a halt. We had entered the ironically named “freeway” where cars were bumper to bumper. As if on cue, a couple near the back of the bus began to bicker loudly.

The image of my father flickered into my mind’s eye again. Traffic always gave my parents reason to fight. *Babushka* claimed they argued about almost everything, even from the beginning of their relationship, back when “the flames of young love had yet to burn out.” I was told they even had a fight over what they would name me. My father wanted to name me Wilhelmina in honor of his late mother, while Mama wanted something more modern, something elegant but less serious. Mina was a compromise—Mina Nikolaevna Arkova.

My parents emigrated from the USSR to start a family in “paradise,” a land free from oppression and a haven for dreamers. I’m not so sure about the oppression-free part, but America is the only home I’ve ever known. I was born and raised here, so I should have felt as welcome as anyone, right? For some reason, though, I always felt partly alien. Kids never seemed to recognize me as one of their own species. But I guess I was a pretty easy target back in middle school, equipped with unfortunately cut bangs tucked behind purple daisy clips, a large blue rolling backpack to prevent scoliosis, a never-back-down attitude, and naturally, no friends. Then there were my homecooked lunches that didn’t smell like anyone else’s lunch.

Mama always went all out when she’d pack my lunch: hardboiled eggs, *pelmeni* (small balls of pastry dough stuffed with minced meat), fresh cucumbers, *salat olivie*, *blini*, and lots of sour cream. Mama knew middle school was a hard transition; I think she wanted me to carry a reminder of home to make me feel less alone.

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Much had changed since those middle school daymares—my confidence, for one. I'd become more accepting of myself and tried not to dwell on anything trivial. Back then, I was ashamed of the ways in which I stood out. To avoid being teased about the contents of my lunchbox, I ate alone in the bathroom for the first month of sixth grade, which was, in hindsight, not a great choice. Eventually, after rumors spread about me being a bathroom troll, I became a nomad, with nowhere to eat lunch in peace. Wherever I went, kids would point and pinch their noses. I was an insecure mess.

I studied myself in the bus window now. A pair of enigmatic hazel eyes outlined by thick, dark lashes gazed back at me. Remembering the profound devastation I experienced when those kids would call me "Bathroom Troll," I started to chuckle. Now I found it utterly hilarious. Why couldn't I see the absurdity of it all back then? But of course, I had no way of knowing that I was going to find a friend. I remembered spending weeks wandering the middle school halls and feeling so *other*—until the day I passed by my homeroom at lunch and saw that there were kids there just hanging out, eating and reading. I had no idea we were even allowed to be in a classroom during lunch. It sure beat hall aerobics, so I went in.

That was where I met my best friend, Nyah Wright. We had a lot in common. We were both ballet dancers and into the same type of books—dystopian fiction. She was close to her older cousin the way I was with Mama. And she never made me feel weird or different. To Nyah, I was just a normal kid—cool, even. Because of her, middle school became a happier place for me, relatively speaking. People still picked on me, but I knew I had a friend, so I focused on her. As long as she was there, I was okay. So when Nyah's parents decided to move to a ritzier neighborhood, we were both devastated.

Nyah and I put up a hell of a fight, I have to say. We boycotted the move and threatened to run away together. It was all very dramatic. Finally,

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our parents agreed to a compromise. Nyah still had to move away, but we got to go to summer camp and dance studio together. And now that her parents had promised to gift her the Honda when their new Tesla arrived at the end of the month, the two of us would be inseparable that summer.

Smiling to myself, I took a snap of the freeway and typed: *Ughh! FML! Miss you, counting down the days till summer.* But before I could press send, I received a message from her first.

OMGWTF Mina!!! u slugged some guy? R u ok? It's all over insta!

Perfect.

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CHAPTER 2

OLIVER

What if something's gone wrong?

A hand touched my shoulder—*shit!* I almost fell out of my chair whipping my head around, only to find it was Remi. *Of course it's her—who else would it be?* I tried to relax, for her sake; it wasn't her fault I was jumpy. I gave her a reassuring smile, then checked the time: 8:25 p.m. Old Town Newhall Library in Santa Clarita had been closed for twenty-five minutes. Remi was the head librarian. She was also my only friend. No one should ever be fooled by her frail figure and her gray hair; the woman had the heart of a warrior. Deep wrinkles ringed her friendly eyes, hidden behind a pair of thick glasses that sat perfectly on the bump of her nose like she was born wearing them.

“You're going to have to forgive me, young man, but I've been calling your name from across the room for the past two minutes. You're on another wavelength tonight, aren't you?” Remi asked. She usually only called me “young man” when I was in trouble.

She fidgeted with the leather cord strapped to her reading glasses and dusted off the lenses with her turquoise blouse. Before I could gauge exactly what it was I felt about moving away from Santa Clarita, she offered another apology, “I really didn't mean to startle you; I'm sorry

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for . . . are you listening to me? Where's your mind wandering off to again? You worried? Nervous about the big move?"

She was right; my head was somewhere else completely. I was supposed to be out of here already—the library, not the city—but my client was an hour late. Which was weird. He usually let me know if something was up.

"It's not too late, you know. You can change your mind and stay; is that what you want?" Remi asked. I shook my head no. She gave me a scrutinizing look, then lifted her chin and sighed. "I have to lock up now, sweetheart. I wish I could stay a bit longer, especially tonight, but I promised Henry I'd pick up his prescription refills, and the pharmacy closes in half an hour."

"Yeah . . . no, I get it."

I checked my phone again for texts; still nothing. I pulled on my backpack and finally stood to face Remi. "Okay, guess I'm on my way, then." My casual words and tone belied the seriousness of the moment. I knew the two of us would never lay eyes on one another again.

She stood head high, with perfect posture, framed between the rows of the books she so proudly kept in order. I wanted to remember Remi that way, just as she had been the day I met her three years back—the best person I'd ever known. It may not have been saying much since I'd mostly only met dickheads my entire life, but I still doubted there was anyone like Remi out there. She was the first person who'd ever really given a shit about me, the only person who cared enough to talk straight to me when I needed it—like the mother I never had. I was seventeen years old. Do the math and you'll get a pretty good picture of my life.

She approached me slowly, reaching for my hands. I stiffened automatically, tensing at the prospect of physical contact. Despite my panic, I let her touch me. She gave my hands an encouraging squeeze, a gesture that told me she was proud of me. I was proud of myself, too. I barely flinched.

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“Take care of yourself out there. I know it’s what you said you want: to start fresh somewhere new, finish high school, be a normal kid, give yourself the life you should’ve had—the life you’ve always deserved. But that’s not . . . last night you said something that’s been bothering me. You said you didn’t care about the money those jurors awarded you and that you won’t touch most of it. I know that seems like a noble thing, but I think it’s bordering on the quixotic. Don’t let some arcane principle—”

“I will use it,” I told her. “I’m using the check they sent me to get settled in New York. I don’t think you got what I meant . . .”

“I understood you perfectly, Oliver. I always do. I’m not talking about a couple thousand dollars; I’m talking about the rest of it. It’s expensive to live in a city like New York; I understand that you want to make a new name for yourself, start over again free and clear of this whole mess that you’re leaving behind. And that’s admirable, it is, but . . . I don’t want you to put that kind of pressure on yourself.”

“I’m not,” I told her. “I won’t.”

“It’s not too late to change your mind.” I shook my head; she knew where I stood on this. What I wouldn’t tell her, and couldn’t tell her, was that the whole New York story was a ruse. My actual destination was Los Angeles. I didn’t like lying to her, but I couldn’t leave a paper trail. No one could know about my new life, not even Remi. Not if I was really going to have a fresh start.

She walked over and rested her hand near mine on the table, fingers thin and long. Remi’s eyes filled with worry and she pursed her lips tightly. I smiled at her as she opened her mouth preparing to speak again. “Promise me one thing: Promise me you won’t isolate yourself. Reach out to others, or at least join a support group out there as soon as you can. And don’t give me that look—you know group therapy has helped you before. You may well need the support again if the anxiety resurfaces or you lose your

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grip on the anger.” Her eyes welled up. I nodded and placed my hand over hers, letting her know it was okay, that she should say what she needed to say. “Someone who is willing to pick up and move to New York is someone who is playing for keeps, no matter what it takes, no matter who is standing in the way. And those are the people you have to watch out for—the wrong sort—the kind that unleash their demons on you. But, at the same time, you can’t let those people isolate you. I feel like I’m making a mess of this . . . ”

She buried her face in her palms, frustrated. Remi thought she was scaring me into staying, but she didn’t have it in her. I’d seen some messed-up shit—a rare kind of horror. I’d endured unbearable pain. There just wasn’t that much left out there that could still scare me. On the contrary, the thought of the new adventure actively thrilled me. I stood up from my computer chair, walked over to her, and pulled her hands off her face—her eyes were wet with tears, but she wore a wistful smile.

“Remster, you’re a mess,” I joked. She cracked up and her whole body shook with laughter.

She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands, then dried her hands against her dark denim jeans. “You are right about that, young man. Just know that I’m here, okay? And you can always come back, or you can change your mind and go somewhere—anywhere—else. You’re free now, but that doesn’t mean you have to be alone.” She smiled, knowing the weight of those final words, as another tear ran down her cheek. I felt a sharp stab in my heart. This must be what love felt like—the unconditional, family kind of love. The vulnerability of it was terrifying. I shut it out, shifting my focus to a splotch of dirt on the computer keyboard space bar, which I began to scratch off.

I didn’t tell her I’d die before ever coming back to this place. Anyway, she already knew that, and I didn’t want to hurt her even more by saying it out loud.

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“Thank you for—” My tongue tripped on the words and suddenly, it felt as though a swollen dry lump was blocking my throat. I closed my mouth, giving up on the sentence. I shut my eyes, ashamed of my inability to deliver a simple thank you—one she’d earned fifty times over. Flashes of memories flooded the blackness of my closed eyes: her gaze always on me as she sat behind her desk; the frustration I felt when I didn’t understand what this strange, intense old lady wanted from me; how I went from refusing to answer a single one of Remi’s questions to letting her become my rock throughout the brutal court proceedings. Through it all, we built an understanding, one that really meant something to me. And now, I couldn’t even thank her for it. *Pathetic.*

Maybe it’s more than that? All this time, I’d been so focused on my plan to move away and erase my messed-up past that it was only now that it truly hit me: I was gonna have to erase Remi, too. My eyes grew hot and moist, and I shook my head to turn back the tears. I rubbed my forehead for a moment. When I took my hand away, Remi was watching me. I raised one hand, palm up, as if I was about to say something, and for a moment her pale blue eyes blazed with emotion. Then she closed them, and the faintest of smiles tugged at the corners of her lips. She nodded, almost imperceptibly, and relief flooded through my chest. That was her benediction, her blessing, and her goodbye. I turned and walked out of the musty dim room, pushing the heavy front door open and squinting at the glare of the setting sun. A warm gust of air hit my face as I headed toward the parking lot. At first, it felt good, like bedsheets on a cold night, especially after sitting under the AC for a couple of hours. It was still too hot for eight o’clock at night. The summer was fading, but not fast enough.

I was surprised to see the client I’d been waiting for in front of the library, standing under a lamp post by the dumpsters on the far end of the lot. Fifty was one of my oldest clients, but I knew next to nothing about him, not even his real name. We kept those out of it. He just called me

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“Kid” and had me call him “Fifty.” I asked him why that number once, and he said, “Got that name cause I always make sure everybody I do business with gets theirs. If I make money, you make money, fifty-fifty.” *What the hell is he up to?* I wondered as I walked toward him. I was used to him running late, but he always texted me when he was, and he always came through, which was rare in my business. So the whole time I was sweating in the library, he was sitting out here in the parking lot?

“Took you long enough, Kid,” Fifty said when I was within earshot.

“I was about to say the same thing to you. How long you been here?”

“Like ten minutes already, shit.”

“We were supposed to meet an hour ago—”

“I sent you a damn text, didn’t I?” he cut me off.

Did he? I went through my last burner phone a couple of days before.

“Well, I didn’t get it,” I said, holding my phone up. “Maybe you accidentally sent it to the other number. I tossed that one—”

“Man, you gotta get yourself a damn smartphone, not those weak-ass burners you always be using. Does it look like we’re slanging dope? Makin’ me change your damn number in my phone like you my side bitch or some shit. What network’s that thing on, anyway? Give that shit here—”

I tossed him my phone. “Buzzy Wireless? For real? Sounds like a bootlegged vibrator company.”

Be that as it may, I liked the privacy and anonymity a burner phone provided, so that was what I planned to keep using, at least until I got to L.A. When I filed for emancipation earlier in the year, I also petitioned the judge for a legal name change—for a clean slate. When I got to L.A., I’d buy a permanent phone under my new name, Oliver Mondell, and get a bank account—the whole nine yards. I wouldn’t have to hide cash in the floorboards anymore. But I didn’t explain any of this to Fifty. He pulled out a wad of cash; I took five smartphones

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out of my bag. We swapped. That was how I flipped: buy a broken phone, swap out the defective parts, shrink-wrap the box, and sell it as new to Fifty. Fifty sold to his exporter, and that guy shipped it out of the country. Everyone got theirs.

“Don’t worry—you won’t have to deal with me much longer. I’m heading to New York tomorrow,” I told him.

This surprised him. “Serious? What business you got in New York?”

I hesitated. Screw it; it didn’t matter anymore. “Nothing. Not yet, anyway. I just finally have my freedom, is all.”

“Freedom? Whatchu know about living without freedom, kid?” Fifty asked, cocking his head to one side.

“No, I mean I got my emancipation papers.”

“Emancipation . . . from your folks? They that bad?”

I zipped my bag shut again and said, “They’re not my folks. Foster care.”

Fifty cocked his head and arched his eyebrows. “Hold up—How old are you?”

“Eighteen in March,” I said.

He lifted his chin and gave me an appraising look.

“Jesus, you’re just a kid, Kid . . . it all makes sense now: the burners, the library, the motorcycle. Damn, and you already makin’ moves? You know what? That’s tight. Starting young, that’s smart, man, you’re smart. Shit, if I had my shit straight at your age, I’d probably be running New York by now. Back then, all I thought about was titties, new kicks, and my rep.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“So, not much has changed?”

“Man, shut your mouth.” He laughed. “No way—you got jokes now? How long we know each other . . . and you wait until your last day in town to make a joke? Been dealing with your boring ass all these years—I mean, what else don’t I know about you?”

I laughed and hoisted my backpack over one shoulder, “All right, Fifty.

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It's been good, take care—"

"Wait, hold up." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of extra Benjamins. "For good luck, Kid. It's been good."

I stopped short, surprised at his gesture.

"No, you don't have to do that."

He took a step closer and shook the money at me.

"Don't disrespect—just take it. It's for good luck. My bad that I never asked nothing about you. Business is business—you know how it is. Most the time, the less you know, the better. If I'd have known, I'd have looked out—know what I mean? You do your thing out there. Find your grip, and maybe I'll come out one day. You can take me to a fancy-ass dinner on the Upper East Side or some shit, all right? Keep your nose clean, you hear me?" A hard lump sat in my throat from all the lies I'd told that day. I swallowed it down hoping Fifty didn't go looking for me in New York one day. But who knows? Maybe I'd end up there after all. I flinched as Fifty grabbed my hand, but he was just pressing the cash against my palm and closing my fingers into a fist over it. He nodded and headed back to his car.

Trying to find my voice, I called out, "All right, Fifty! See you!"

It always made me uncomfortable when strangers tried to help me out or take care of me, but then again, who wasn't a stranger to me? After what my mother did, anything anyone did for me was automatically an act of kindness. That is, until a man named Jack Burns came into my life. Jack ran one of the foster homes I ended up in, though it was a pretty big stretch to call it a home. The foster system was broken beyond repair: too many kids, too few supervisors, not enough places to go. I was stuck in a children's facility at ten, supposedly a temporary arrangement. I stayed there until I turned fourteen, when I was finally moved back into a foster home—Jack's foster home.

I had been so stoked when I first heard I was moving back into a real

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home. Like a naïve idiot, I thought that anything would be better than the prison I'd been in for the last four years. But if the facility had felt like a prison, Jack's foster home was worse than prison. It was hell. If I'd learned anything since then, it was that if something sounded too good to be true, it was. I pushed the crisp two hundred dollars into the pocket of my jeans as I watched Fifty's car disappear around the corner.

I hopped on my bike, a black 2006 KYMCO Venox 250. It was no Harley, but it did the job. I'd bought it with money I saved up, a token of my hard work and the freedom I'd always craved. As I rode up the street, the library building got smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror. I paused at the stop sign at the end of the road for a minute and said a silent goodbye to it, that building that had brought me solace—that building where I had met the woman who became my savior.

The blast of a car horn jolted me back to the present. The car behind me wanted me to turn already. I raised my hand, "My bad." That sound would have jolted me off the motorcycle a year ago. Maybe Remi was right; maybe therapy really did help. Time healed some wounds. I remembered the first time Remi had reached for my hand and I'd jumped back so hard I'd hit the wall. Seeing her reaction to my fear made me realize how messed up I'd become. It was in that moment that, for the first time, I started to feel some clarity that the things that had gone on in Jack's house were not only not okay, but that they might've messed me up for good. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks, and I'd just slid onto the floor right in front of Remi, drowning in grief over my own life. Remi ended up being the real deal, not just another stranger trying to take advantage. So, eventually I told her everything about Jack Burns, the piece of shit who had been beating and raping the kids in his care. I was fourteen at the time, but most of the kids he preyed on were younger than me—some much younger. Just the thought of it turned my stomach even then. I was the oldest, so it was up to me to save us. It was what I should have done the

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minute I knew what was going on.

I rode across the intersection, past closed furniture stores and empty shopping plazas. In hindsight, I couldn't believe how much I'd told her that day about the complaints we'd filed, and the multiple people we'd told of the abuse, including school counselors, social workers, police officers, and representatives working for the child abuse emergency hotline—professionals who'd been not just morally but legally obliged to initiate an investigation. And yet most of the complaints were simply ignored. The one time someone opened an investigation, all they did was send a few caseworkers to check on the conditions of the home. Jack naturally lied his ass off. We were interviewed too but he was present, so most of the kids were too scared to tell the truth. Jack's steely, dead-eyed glances made it all too clear there would be punishment once the caseworkers left. Faced with a lying adult and a room of terrified kids, the caseworkers did the worst possible thing: They filed it as a false complaint in the system. We were labeled as the kids who cried wolf. No one was going to believe anything we said after that.

"Have you ever considered hiring a lawyer?" Remi had asked gently, once I'd gotten most of the details out.

"No, we don't have any money." The thought never even crossed my mind as a realistic option. It seemed killing him would be easier.

"You don't necessarily need any money—cases like this are usually represented by public defenders, or by family lawyers doing pro bono work. We just need to find someone good—someone who's won a case like this before and is passionate about the work. We need to find you a firm of sharks who will fight for you until they've exhausted every option."

"Where do I look for someone like that?" I asked her.

"Well, we'll start with the American Bar Association directory." She pulled a fat book from a shelf, placed it on the table, and patted the seat next to her. I'd sat down and watched her thumb through the pages,

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sticking Post-It notes on various listings. Then she got on the phone and made a few calls, and before I knew it, I had a lawyer—and the rest, as they say, was history.

As I approached the Santa Clara River, I eased out on the clutch and turned my bike onto the bridge that ran across it. I had spent a lot of time there planning, thinking, pacing. When the river ran dry, teens hung out and smoked pot under that bridge, but so did a lot of creeps and tweakers. A girl from my last foster home had to fight off some crazy guy down there who had tried to rape her. For all Remi's warnings about New York, I was laboring under no misconceptions about L.A., or anywhere I might go in the future. This city was small and still I'd seen plenty of evil. Evil was everywhere.

I rode past another vacant shopping plaza. Everything out there was oversized: the buildings, the roads, the malls, the mega-stores, the parking structures. It was like someone had built it all in anticipation, like it was just a matter of time before the masses would descend. If you built it, they would come, or whatever. It could happen eventually, I guessed. But for now, there was just a lot of room for doing nothing and not a lot of room for business growth. There weren't enough buyers or exporters to move volume and so the seller market was becoming oversaturated. That was one of the reasons why I was moving out west.

The day that jury in my trial against the state had stood up and ruled in my favor, granting me two million dollars, was the day Los Angeles went from a faraway fantasy to an achievable goal. That win gave me a sliver of hope during a very messed-up time. It made me think that maybe a broken system could be fixed—and that possibly, though less likely, even I could be fixed. It was the first time I ever had something to live for and look forward to. That was one year ago.

That was also the day my application for emancipation had been officially approved. That, like everything else, was thanks to Remi. I had no

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idea there were programs set up to help kids in the system. Turns out help had been out there all along. I just didn't know how to look for it.

Remi and I found a website for in-state foster kids, fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov, which had a page listing the rights of all foster kids. Reading them made me sick, because almost all my rights had been violated at one point or another. The Independent Living Program provided money for vocational training, transportation, college, and 30 percent of housing. They also helped you get a computer, find a job, and access scholarship opportunities. But first, I had to write an emancipation preparation plan with my social worker and update it every six months.

It felt like pointless bullshit to me, just more obstacles blocking my way forward. But Remi explained to me that my rights were integral to the US democratic system. So if I wanted to turn my situation around, I had to know my rights and learn how to leverage them using the process inherent in that same system. So that is exactly what I did. And once I knew what federal law said I was entitled to, I stopped being an easy target. Every damn application I filled out got me closer and closer to my rights—my independence.

Enough with the life review, I told myself, as I pulled my bike onto the grass. Everything in this town reminded me of the most miserable years of my miserable life. I needed to let go of it all now that I was finally free of him. I needed to wipe him from my memory and never look back.

I had finally reached my destination: the Lily of the Valley Mobile Home Community. It wasn't much, but no one had been raped or beaten on the grounds so far as I knew, and that was as good as a five-star rating around there. I pulled off my helmet and walked up a short driveway to the small gray double-wide. Foster homes were "like a box of chocolates—you never know what you're going to get": a mansion (in your dreams, Orphan Annie) or a middle-of-nowhere shithole with no indoor plumbing (more likely). This time, I had lucked out, if you can call it that. It was probably

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not a matter of chance; the state didn't want bad press from shoving me back into a group home or a government facility while I filed for my freedom papers. Apparently, they had a list of "normal homes" behind glass that says, "break in case of emergency."

The door was unlocked; I walked inside and—*crack*. I stepped on something crunchy. Crap, I broke someone's something.

"Dinner," Breanne called out from the kitchen.

Braiden ran down out of his room, "Hey, what the hell? You broke my volcano project, Assface." Braiden was nursing a paper cut as though it was a massive wound. He cringed dramatically as he covered the cut on his elbow with an oversized bandage. I rolled my eyes.

"Summer school's over. Didn't you turn this shit in already?"

"Yeah, so?" He fired back, bugging the crap out of me. "I'm keeping it as a souvenir."

"Don't leave it by the door next time, Assface."

"Dinner!" Breanne yelled. She didn't like to repeat herself. The house sounded like a school cafeteria and smelled like burnt toast. She was probably trying to make homemade pizza again. My newest foster mom was as straightedge as they come. She was a forty-something ex-Marine with an American flag in her front yard. She recycled, paid taxes, followed the speed limit and made complete stops at every stop sign. She voted in every primary—even the June primary—because, and this was a house mantra: "Every vote counts." As if two kids of her own weren't enough, she'd taken in four foster kids, me included. She went back to working full-time as a family counselor as soon as her youngest foster kid, Julie, turned five last year, but somehow still didn't miss a beat at home. Breakfast and dinner were usually borderline inedible but always on time, and school lunches were packed the night before. Breanne was as decent a foster mom as they came, but she had her moods. On a bad day, she could be as cold as a snake. She liked rules—setting them and enforcing them: no grades

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below a B; extracurriculars were mandatory; chores were nonnegotiable; the cleaning chart was sacred; every week we washed the toilets, the stoves, the car, the floors, and the windows; we volunteered at shelter; no TV in the house; no smartphones; and we answered to her with “Yes ma’am” or “No ma’am.” It was the kind of consistent structure I didn’t necessarily like but could respect. I always knew where I stood with Breanne, because it all came down to her rules, and whether I’d followed them or not. That gave me a kind of strange control over my daily life that I’d never had before.

Her own kids were a different story. From what I could tell, Breanne got along better with her foster kids than her own, but that made sense on some level. Foster kids knew how bad it could get out there, even the ones who hadn’t gone through hell themselves—the rumors got around. We knew enough to be grateful when we landed in a home that felt that safe, even if all the damn rules were choking the life out of you. Breanne tried to make me get rid of my motorcycle but that was one thing I wouldn’t budge on. “I appreciate everything you’ve done, taking me in this year—my history and all. And I respect you, but no,” I told her. “It’s the only thing I have that’s mine.” And I guess my logic wasn’t lost on her, because she didn’t bring it up again.

Her husband, Jorge, worked in insurance—risk assessment or some kind of pointy-head thing, I think. He wasn’t around much. Most days, if I stayed in my room, I didn’t run into him at all, which is how I liked it. It was nothing serious; just that his shifty eye contact really bugged me, especially while he was explaining something super boring and random.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Breanne stopped me as I headed for my room.

“No, ma’am, I ate already—but thank you very much just the same,” I lied. I walked into my room quickly, shutting the door behind me. I sat on the edge of my bed, taking in the room. I shared it with Breanne’s

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biological son, Franklin, who was thirteen. Noel, twelve, and Braiden, nine, were across the hall. I chose bottom bunk and liked to hang a blanket up for privacy. The room felt stuffy, so I got up to open a window, but almost tore my groin slipping on a dusty old video game poster in the middle of the floor. *How is this still here?* I kicked it out of the way, then kicked at it again out of anger. I missed and knocked my toes into the desk so hard that the reading lamp fell in a loud *clank*.

“Everything okay?” Breanne called out from the kitchen.

I took a breath. “Yes, Ma’am, I’m just working out . . . sorry. Everything’s fine!” Breanne forbade pins, nails, or screws in her walls, so Franklin’s entire video game poster collection had been stuck up by regular Scotch Tape. Most of the tape had lost its strength, and some posters were dangling by just one corner, while a couple had been collecting dust on the floor for months, but Franklin didn’t touch them. I usually didn’t pick them up either, out of principle. I’d been working with a court-appointed therapist on keeping my anger in check, but I had nasty slipups—more secrets to keep.

A nice foster home usually meant unbroken foster kids, so I was the only one in there with a history of abuse. Still, Noel Jopeecho—nicknamed Piss Miss because he couldn’t aim for shit—always showed me respect. He looked up to me, tried to act like me, and once, I caught him trying on my jacket—but I put a stop to that shit real quick. It was cute and all, but the endless interrogation got irritating, especially when he made it personal.

“So, what’s your story? Is it true that you beat up a guard in juvie?”

“No,” I’d answer.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. You don’t seem that crazy. Like, that’s not what I meant—I’m not saying you’re crazy but not that crazy. So . . . have you ever seen boobs in real life?” I had to push him out of the room and barricade the door to get him to shut up.

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Then there was the youngest one—Julie, six—who followed me around the house like a duckling. I think I reminded her of her older brother. She showed me his picture once and said, “Just like you.” They were separated by the system. She was brave and outgoing despite the burn marks that covered the right side of her face from a freak accident back when she was a baby. She used to cuddle up next to me on the couch at night while I made up stories about some princess and her unicorns or some shit. She would usually fall asleep before I ran out of ideas. But I had stopped the whole thing a few months ago. Julie was ignoring me lately, but whatever. Me? I just shut my emotions off and shifted my focus. It was for the best. I knew from day one it was only a matter of time before I moved out. I figured it would hurt her less if she didn’t depend on me so much. I’d been trying to avoid the house in general that month.

Mona had been ignoring me for a while anyway, so nothing new there. She was the oldest, Breanne’s nineteen-year-old daughter. I was low-key hooking up with her the previous year. She pulled me into the bathroom one night when everyone was asleep. I was surprised but . . . shit, I was down. She knew exactly what she wanted and wasn’t shy about showing me. She used to say our hookups were just for practice. And it was fun for a while, until she started talking about us getting a place together when she transferred to NYU.

“That’s not gonna happen.”

She looked mad. “Why? It would be stupid to stay in separate places and pay double rent.”

“I’m not interested. I’m sorry.”

“Not interested in sharing a place, or in me?” I didn’t answer. “Wow. Okay, got it. Screw you.” And that was that.

But that was all in the past now. It wasn’t like we’d ever had an actual connection. First thing tomorrow, I was going to the court clerk’s office to pick up a certified copy of my emancipation order. It was the only thing

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still standing between me and leaving. That document was my ticket to freedom. Maybe I should have paid for ten copies right off the bat just to make sure I never had to go back.

I was already packed. I was always packed, out of habit. I didn't have much to take, anyway—just the clothes on my back, some files, and a gift from Remi—a book, *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus. There was something messed up about her choice, I had to say. *An absurdist, existential novel seems like an odd thing to give as a present, no matter what the occasion.* I think she was trying to say: *You think you're messed up? Read a book about this completely apathetic piece of shit—this total stain of a human—and you'll feel better about yourself.* I should have just left it behind, maybe passed it on to Piss Miss just to mess with him. But I couldn't let it go yet. Everything else I'd buy brand new in L.A.—brand-new things for my brand-new life.

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