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*For Ivy Wild, my lawyer friend, who taught me that staying
on the right side of the law is not only the moral thing to do
—but also the cheapest.*

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A person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn and
not easily mended.

—Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

PROLOGUE

CHRISTIAN

Do. Not. Touch. Anything.

That was the only rule my mother had ever enforced, but it was one I'd known better than to break as a kid, unless I was in the mood for some belt thrashing and grits with weevils for the month.

It was the summer break after I'd turned fourteen that lit the match that'd later burn everything down. The orange spark would catch and spread, devouring my life, leaving phosphate and ashes in its wake.

Mom dragged me into her workplace. She made some solid arguments why I couldn't stay home and screw around—the chief one being she didn't want me to end up like other kids my age: smoking weed, breaking padlocks, and delivering suspicious-looking packages for local drug dealers.

Hunts Point was where dreams went to die, and even though you couldn't accuse my mother of ever being a dreamer, she viewed me as a liability. Bailing me out was not in her plans.

Plus, staying back home and being reminded of my reality wasn't something I was keen on either.

I got to join her every day on her trip to Park Avenue, under one condition—I was not to put my dirty hands on anything in the Roth family's penthouse. Not the overpriced Henredon furniture, not the bay windows, not the Dutch-imported plants, and definitely—most certainly—*not* the girl.

"This one's special. Not to be tarnished. Mr. Roth loves her more than his eyesight," Mom, an immigrant from Belarus, reminded me in her thickly accented English on our bus ride there, stuffed like blue-collared sardines with other cleaners, landscapers, and doormen.

Arya Roth had been the bane of my existence before I'd even met her. The untouchable fine jewel, precious compared to my worthless existence. In the years before I met her, she was an unpleasant idea. An avatar with shiny pigtails, spoiled and whiny. I had zero desire to meet her. In fact, I'd often lain in my cot at night wondering what kind of exciting, costly, age-appropriate adventures she was up to and wishing her all kinds of bad things. Freak car accidents, falling off a cliff, plane crashes, scurvy. Anything went, and in my mind, privileged Arya Roth was put through an array of terrors while I lounged back with popcorn and laughed.

Everything I knew about Arya through my mother's awestruck tales, I disliked. To add insult to injury, she was exactly my age, which made comparing our lives both inevitable and infuriating.

She was the princess in the Upper East Side ivory tower, living in a penthouse stretched across five thousand square feet, the kind of space I couldn't even fathom, let alone envision. I, on the other hand, was stuck in a prewar studio apartment in Hunts Point, the loud arguments between the sex workers and their clients under my window and Mrs. Van berating her husband downstairs the soundtrack of my adolescence.

Arya's life smelled of flowers, boutiques, and fruity candles—the faint scent of it clung to my mother's clothes when she came back home—while the stench of the fish market near my apartment was so persistent it permanently soaked into our walls.

Arya was pretty—my mother kept banging on about her emerald eyes—while I was wiry and awkward. All knees and ears poking out of a haphazardly drawn stick figure. Mom said I would grow into my features eventually, but with my lack of nutrition, I had my doubts. Apparently, my father had been like that too. Gangly growing up but handsome once ripe. Since I'd never met the bastard, I had no way of confirming that claim. Ruslana Ivanova's baby daddy was married to another woman and lived in Minsk with his three children and two ugly dogs. The one-way plane ticket to New York had been his parting gift to my mother when she'd told him she was knocked up with me, along with a request she never contact him again.

Since my mother didn't have a family—her single mother had died years earlier—that seemed like a perfectly sensible solution to everyone involved. Other than me, of course.

That left us alone in the Big Apple, treating life like it was after our throats. Or maybe it had already clutched our necks, cutting off our air supply. It always felt like we were gasping for something—air, food, electricity, or the right to exist.

Which brings me to the final and most damning sin of all committed by Arya Roth and the main reason why I had never wanted to meet her—Arya had a family.

A mother. A father. Uncles and aunts aplenty. She had a grandmother in North Carolina, whom she visited every Easter, and cousins in Colorado she went snowboarding with each Christmas. Her life had context, a direction, a narrative. It was framed, fully plotted, all the individual pieces colored neatly, while mine seemed bare and disjointed.

There was Mom, but she and I seemed like we were thrown together accidentally. There were the neighbors Mom never bothered getting to know, the sex workers who propositioned me for my school lunch, and the NYPD, who came rolling twice a week onto my block, sliding yellow tape across shattered front windows. Happiness was something that belonged to other people. People we didn't know, who lived on different streets and led different lives.

I'd always felt like a guest in the world—a voyeur. But if I was going to watch someone else's life, might as well watch the Roths, who led perfect, picturesque lives.

And so, to escape from the hellhole I had been born into, all I had to do was follow the instructions.

Do. Not. Touch. Anything.

In the end, I didn't just touch something.

I touched the most precious thing in the Roth household.

The girl.

CHAPTER ONE

ARYA

Present

He was going to come.

I knew it, even if he was late. Which he never was, until today.

We had a date every first Saturday of each month.

He'd show up armed with a shrewd grin, two biryani bowls, and the latest outrageous office gossip, which was better than any reality TV out there.

I stretched under a cloister overlooking a gothic garden, wiggling my toes in my Prada pumps, my soles kissing a medieval column.

No matter how old I was or how well I mastered the art of being a ruthless businesswoman, during our monthly visits to the Cloisters, I always felt like a fifteen-year-old, pimply and impressionable and thankful for the crumbs of intimacy and affection thrown my way.

"Move over, sweetheart. The takeout's dripping."

See? He came.

I tucked my legs under my butt, allowing Dad space to settle. He produced two oily containers out of a plastic bag and handed me one.

"You look horrible," I observed, cracking open my container. The scent of nutmeg and saffron crawled into my nose, making my mouth water. My father was flushed and shadow eyed, his face stamped with a grimace.

"Well, you look fantastic, as per usual." He kissed my cheek, settling against the column in front of me so we were face to face.

I nudged the food with my plastic fork. Soft pieces of chicken fell apart over a pillow of rice. I scooped a bite into my mouth, closing my eyes. "I could eat this three times a day, every day."

“I could believe that, seeing as you spent fourth grade living solely on mac-’n’-cheese balls.” He chuckled. “How’s world domination going?”

“Slowly but surely.” I opened my eyes. He poked his food around. First, he’d been late, and now, I noticed he looked barely recognizable. It wasn’t his form or his slightly wrinkly attire or the lack of fresh haircut that gave it away. It was his expression, which I hadn’t seen before in the almost thirty-two years I’d known him.

“How are you, anyway?” I sucked on the tines of my fork.

His phone, which was tucked into the front pocket of his slacks, buzzed. The green flash shone through the fabric. He ignored it. “Good. Busy. We’re being audited, so the office is upside down. Everyone’s running around like a headless chicken.”

“Not again.” I reached into his bowl, fishing for a golden potato hiding under a mountain of rice and slipping it between my lips. “But that explains things.”

“Explains what?” He looked alert.

“I thought you looked a little off.”

“It’s a pain in the neck, but I’ve danced this dance before. How’s business?”

“Actually, I’d like your opinion about a client.” I’d begun launching into a topic when his phone vibrated in his pocket again. I squinted at the fountain in the center of the garden, wordlessly indicating that it was okay for him to take the call.

Dad pulled a paper napkin from the take-out bag instead, patting it along his forehead. Cloud-shaped paper stuck to his sweat. The temperature was below thirty-five degrees. What business did this man have sweating buckets?

“And how’s Jillian?” He raised his voice an octave. A sense of calamity, like a faint, barely visible crack in a wall, crawled over my skin. “I thought you said her grandma had hip surgery last week. I asked my secretary to send her flowers.”

Of course he had. Dad was a constant I could trust. While my mom was a day-late-and-dollar-short kind of parent—always the last to figure out what I was going through, oblivious to my feelings, MIA during pivotal moments in my life—Dad remembered the birthdays, the graduation dates, and what I’d worn for my friends’ bat mitzvahs. He’d been there during the breakups, the girl drama, and the incorporation of my company, going over

the fine print with me. He was a mother, a father, a sibling, and a comrade. An anchor in the troubled sea of life.

“Grams Joy is fine.” I handed him my paper napkins, eyeing him curiously. “Already bossing Jillian’s mom around. Listen, are you—”

His phone buzzed for the third time in a minute.

“You should take that.”

“No, no.” He glanced around us, looking as white as a sheet.

“Whoever is trying to call you is not going to go away.”

“Really, Ari, I’d rather hear about your week.”

“It was good, eventful, and it passed. Now answer.” I pointed to what I assumed was the cause of his strange behavior.

With a heavy sigh and a healthy dose of resignation, Dad finally pulled his phone out and pressed it to his ear so tightly the shell whitened to ivory.

“Conrad Roth speaking. Yes. Yes.” He paused, his eyes dancing manically. His biryani bowl slipped from between his fingers, collapsing over the ancient stone. I tried to catch it in vain. “Yes. I know. Thank you. I do have representation. No, I won’t be making a comment.”

Representation? A comment? For an audit?

People floated along the bows. Tourists crouched to take pictures of the garden. A swarm of children spun around the columns, their laughter like church bells. I stood up and began cleaning up the mess Dad had made on the ground.

It’s fine, I told myself. No company wants to be audited. Let alone a hedge fund.

But even as I fed myself this excuse, I couldn’t fully swallow it. This wasn’t about business. Dad didn’t lose sleep—or his wits—over work.

He hung up. Our eyes met.

Before he even spoke, I knew. Knew that in a few minutes, I’d be falling, falling, falling. That nothing could stop me. That this was bigger than me. Than him, even.

“Ari, there’s something you should know . . .”

I closed my eyes, taking a sharp, before-you-jump-into-the-water breath.

Knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTIAN

Present

Principles. I had very few of them.

Only a handful, really, and I wouldn't call them principles, per se. More like preferences. Strong partialities? Yeah, that sounds about right.

It was my *preference* not to deal with property and contract disputes as a litigator, for instance. Not because I had a moral or ethical issue representing either side of the aisle, but simply because I found the subject morbidly boring and entirely unworthy of my precious time. Tort and equitable claims were where I thrived. I liked messy, emotional, and destructive. Throw salacious into the mix, and I was in litigation heaven.

It was my *preference* to drink myself into a mini coma with my best friends, Arsène and Riggs, at the Brewtherhood down the street, as opposed to smiling, nodding, and listening to another mind-numbing story about my client's kid's T-ball game.

It was also my preference—*not* principle—to not wine and dine Mr. Shady McShadeson here, also known as Myles Emerson. But Myles Emerson was about to sign on a hefty retainer with my law firm, Cromwell & Traurig. And so here I was, on a Friday night, a shit-eating grin smeared across my face, tucking the company credit card into the black leather check holder as I treated Mr. Emerson to foie gras tarts, tagliolini with shaved black truffles, and a bottle of wine with a price tag that could put his kid through four years of an Ivy League education.

“Gotta say, I'm feeling real good about this, fellas.” Mr. Emerson let out a burp, patting his third-trimester-size belly. He held an uncanny physical resemblance to a bloated Jeff Daniels. I was glad he was feeling

dandy, because I sure as hell was in good spirits about charging him a monthly fee starting next month. Emerson owned a large janitorial company that mainly catered to big corporations and recently had had four lawsuits filed against him, all for breach of contract and damages. He needed not only legal aid but also duct tape to shut his trap. He'd been bleeding so much money over the past few months I'd offered to put him on a retainer. The irony wasn't lost on me. This man, who offered people cleaning services, had hired me to clean up after *him*. Unlike his employees, though, I charged an astronomical hourly rate and wasn't prone to getting screwed out of my paycheck.

It did not occur to me to refuse to defend him in his multiple and deplorable cases. The obvious parallel involving the poor cleaners who went after him, some of them making below minimum wage and working with forged legal documentation, went right over my head.

"We're here to make things easier for you." I stood up, reaching to shake Myles Emerson's hand while buttoning my blazer. He nodded to Ryan and Deacon, the partners at my law firm, and made his way out of the restaurant, ogling the rears of two of the waitresses.

My plate was going to be full with this tool bag. Luckily, I had a healthy appetite when it came to moving up the corporate ladder.

I sat back down, leaning in my seat.

"And now for the real reason we've all gathered here"—I looked between them—"my impending partnership at the firm."

"I beg your pardon?" Deacon Cromwell, an Oxford-educated expat who'd started the firm forty years ago and was more ancient than the Bible, furrowed his bushy brows.

"Christian believes he earned a corner office and his last name on the door after putting in the time and the effort," Ryan Traurig, head of the litigation department and the partner who actually showed his face between the office's walls every now and then, explained to the old man.

"Don't you think this was something we should've discussed?" Cromwell turned to Traurig.

"We're discussing it now." Traurig smiled good-naturedly.

"*Privately*," Cromwell spit out.

"Privacy is overrated." I took a sip of my wine, wishing it were scotch. "Wake up and smell the roses, Deacon. I've been a senior associate for three years. I charge partner rates. My annual reviews are flawless, and I

reel in the big fish. You've been jerking me around for too long. I'd like to know where I stand. Honesty is the best policy."

"That's a bit rich coming from a lawyer." Cromwell shot me a side-eyed glance. "Also, in the spirit of open conversation, may I remind you you've graduated seven years ago, with a two-year stint at the DA's office upon graduation? It's not exactly like we're robbing you of an opportunity. Our firm has a nine-year partner track. Timeline-wise, you haven't paid your dues."

"Timeline-wise, you've been making three hundred percent more in this firm since I joined," I countered. "Fuck the track. Make me equity—and *name* partner."

"Cutthroat to the bone." He tried to look unaffected, but his brow became clammy. "How do you sleep at night?"

I swirled the wine in my glass the way an award-winning sommelier had taught me a decade earlier. I also golfed, used the firm's time-share in Miami, and suffered through talking politics in gentlemen's clubs.

"Usually with a leggy blonde by my side." False, but I knew a pig like him would appreciate it.

He chuckled, the predictable simpleton that he was. "Wiseass. You're too ambitious for your own good."

Cromwell's view of ambition varied, depending on the person who possessed it. On junior associates who clocked sixty billable hours a week, it was terrific. On me, it was a nuisance.

"No such thing, sir. Now I'd like an answer."

"*Christian.*" Taurig shot me a smile that begged me to shut up. "Give us five minutes. I'll meet you outside."

I didn't like being tossed to the street while they discussed me. Deep down, I was still Nicky from Hunts Point. But that boy had to be curbed in polite society. Gently bred men didn't shout and flip tables. I had to speak their language. Soft words, sharp knives.

After pushing my chair back, I slipped into my Givenchy coat. "Fine. It'll give me time to try out that new Davidoff cigar."

Taurig's eyes lit up. "Winston Churchill?"

"Limited edition." I winked. Bastard rode my ass for everything cigar and liquor related like he didn't earn six times my wage.

"My, my. Got a spare?"

"You know it."