

22.

"Who the hell are you? To disrupt my world"

She shouldn't be here.

She shouldn't be here at all.

Estelle had told herself countless times that this was a bad idea, but then she convinced herself it was just business, just a bar—nothing serious or alarming. So why were her feet glued to the pavement outside, her eyes xed on the building, unable to take a step forward?

Maybe it was because she had never set foot in a place like this, not once in her entire life. How could she have? She had no friends to drag her to such places, and no desire to go on her own. After Carla's betrayal, she pushed away every opportunity to make new friends, pouring all her energy into being the perfect wife for Hunter.

Her heart clenched painfully. Thinking about it now, she realized how foolish she had been. She had spent her life for a man who didn't deserve it, never once considering her own happiness. It was almost laughable, how things had turned out. She had thought he was her happiness, that she didn't need anything else.

She blinked away the tears that threatened to spill - her eyes darting up. The sky was clear, but the sun was already dipping, signalling the approach of night. A shiver ran through her body at the thought. She needed to get this over with before darkness fell. With a resolute nod and a glance at the bar entrance, where a couple was entering, she decided it was time to put on her bravado and get this done. After all, it was just business—not for pleasure. But who in their right mind would choose a bar to discuss business, anyway? Or was she overthinking it?

With a shrug and a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and, with a purposeful sway of her hips, made her way toward the bar, her heels clicking sharply on the tiled oor.

Inside, she paused, taking in the scene. She had never imagined anything like this. The bar was beautiful, almost artistic; it was as if it had been designed for aesthetics rather than for people to drink until they dropped, as she had always pictured bars. Her eyes caught movement, and she turned to see a short man waving at her with a toothy grin.

Mr. Crookes.

Her stomach did a nervous ip. Of course, it would. Mr. Crookes was one of the largest investors in the company, and she had only met him once before, at her wedding. He was a cunning man, a talkative one, but intelligent too. As she made her way toward him, her eyes swept over his appearance. He wore a black suit that accentuated his pale complexion and wrinkled skin. His grey hair was slicked back with gel, giving him a younger look—if you ignored the crinkles on his face.

"Mrs. Gray," he greeted, extending his hand. Estelle froze for just a second, her smile faltering. "Ah! My apologies," he said with a smile she couldn't quite read—was it genuine or mocking? "I'm so used to calling you Mrs. Gray that it slipped out. You know, I attended your wedding, so it's hard to break the habit."

He beamed at her, and Estelle forced a smile, nodding. "It's ne. I understand, no offence taken."

"That's good," he said, still beaming as he took her hand and kissed it. The gesture sent a shiver of disgust through her, but she returned his smile, even though her insides were screaming. Let go of my hand so I can wipe off your slime. It was rude, but the man deserved it.

She gave him another polite smile when he nally let go. "Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing to the chair beside her as he sat down.

"Thank you," she replied, taking her seat with as much grace as she could muster. Inside, she was trembling with nerves. This was the largest investor in the company. She couldn't afford to mess this up, or everything she'd worked for would be for nothing. She might never forgive herself if this went wrong. She dgeted slightly, sending one of her practised sweet smiles to Mr Crookes, who was looking at her with that same unnerving smile, his eyes roving over her body like a hawk.

What the hell is wrong with him?

After dgeting for what felt like minutes, she decided to start their discussion. "Our company," she began.

"Shall I order us a drink? I hope you don't mind a bit of alcohol," he interrupted.

Estelle's eyes snapped to his face, ready to decline the offer, but the look he gave her was challenging, as if to say, Decline the offer and forfeit whatever you came here for. She stared at him, her mind a battleeld. She should decline. But if she does, she might appear rude and be on his bad side. What does she do? Why does she have to be the one here anyway? This was Hunter's mess, he should be dealing with it, not her. But then she remembered—she was the boss now, the one with the highest share. A groan escaped her lips.

"It's ne if you don't want to," Mr. Crookes grumbled, and Estelle, who had been looking past him, icked her eyes back to his face, her mouth opening in surprise. Mr"I'll just drink on my own."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude," she quickly corrected.

Mr. Crookes gave her a disapproving look, so she added, "I'll have the drink."

"You will? That's nice," he said, beckoning to the bartender before she could change her mind. In no time, their table was lled with expensive wines Estelle wasn't sure she had ever tasted, despite being born with a silver spoon.

"I'm impressed you managed to acquire shares without your husband's knowledge. You're an ambitious woman."

Ex-husband, Estelle wanted to scream, until he memorize each letter, but instead, she forced a smile. "A woman needs to be ambitious to be respected. And Hunter is no longer my hus—"

"Oh, I'm aware," he said dismissively, leaning back in his chair. "You made that clear by making it public. Nice move. I love it. Exactly how I love my women." He leaned forward with a toothy grin, and Estelle's brow furrowed in confusion—until she felt ngers curling up her thigh.

She jumped up, startled by the act, the sudden movement causing the drink in her hand to spill onto her body and crash to the oor with a sharp c***k.

"Are you alright, dear?" Mr Crookes asked, his face plastered with concern that no one could have guessed was a mask for his predatory behaviour.

Estelle glared at him as he reached toward her, but whether her glare wasn't deadly enough, or he simply chose to ignore it, she didn't know. She watched him with growing disgust, tears burning in her eyes as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, his eyes glued to her body, drooling as he dabbed at the wetness on her clothes.

"You should be careful when holding a full cup, or you might end up getting yourself wet," he murmured, shamelessly licking his lips. Her body tensed as his hand moved toward her breast, and she closed her eyes, trying to keep herself from lashing out - telling herself, he was a client - a big one for that matter. But when he didn't stop and instead ogled her cleavage, her self-restraint snapped. She raised her hand to slap him but stopped short when a blur of motion whipped past her face, sending the perverted old man sprawling off the table and onto the oor.

"Mr. Crookes!" she screamed, rushing toward him as he squirmed and groaned on the oor, as shocked as everyone else in the bar.

Christ! This wasn't how I planned today. Angered, she spun around, glaring at the man who had punched Mr Crookes, and who was now sporting a satised smile.

Smack!

Her hand connected with his cheek before she could control herself, and she spat, almost screaming, "Who the hell are you?"