

In the Shadow of the CEO

Female characters	Jia Moon	Age 20+, waitress of a premium hotel, worked illegally to repay the huge debt and supported her family. She was rescued by Atlas during an assault by her boss and was thus forced to work for Atlas' as an exchange. [Voice: independent and tough]
	Lydia Worthington	Age 25+, one of the assistants of CEO, got full ready at CEO's demand at anytime, anywhere, taught Jia the rules of being a qualified assistant. [Voice: light and bubbly, polite but strict]
Male characters	Atlas Grayson	Age 25+, CEO of Pandora Lights Agency, arrogant and insensitive, nobody seems to be able to go against his command. [voice: cold and controlling.]

- For female or male character: you only need to read the highlighted part.
- For narrator: you only need to read the other part that are not highlighted.
- For both characters and narrator (one person record the book): you need to read all the lines.

-----Extract from chapt.1

"Do you think you're special?" he asked coolly, his words marble and his eyes ice.
"Chasing me down yourself and trying to persuade me with passion? Was that the plan?"

Jia continued to hold the paper out in front of her, presenting it with both hands to him. "Please," she said, keeping her voice strong and steady even though she thought she could feel him killing her with just a look. "I need this job. I'll work harder than you could ever want. You won't regret it, sir."

He swiftly snatched the sheet out of her hands with murderous grace, and with his

other hand, tore the paper in two. He overlapped the two halves and tore them into quarters - and then into eighths, and then half that again. He tossed the pieces to the side, letting them flutter down to the asphalt.

"I don't need more desperate, entitled faces in my agency. If I ever see yours again, I'll have security handle it."

And now, here he was. Atlas Grayson, CEO of Pandora Lights Agency, the most lucrative company of talent scouts this side of the country. Maybe on both sides. In any case, he was one of the faces who had attended the VIP dinner earlier tonight, and she had recognized him then, too. But Jia had tamped down her embarrassment and anxiety and behaved as usual, turning on the professional warmth and charm that she was known for instead.

She had nothing to worry about, she had told herself at the time. Atlas Grayson saw so many faces in a day that he would never remember her; it was no use being paranoid. Aside from asking for another refill of refreshments, he didn't have a single reason to look twice at her. And when all the guests had left for the night, him included, she had breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had happened. He hadn't made a move to embarrass her or confront her in any way.

But here he was now, staring her down with their faces scant inches apart. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he said, "but I think it's necessary to call the authorities since a man just tried to force himself on someone."

His disdainful tone sounded more like a criticism of her intelligence rather than a show of concern, but Jia forced her lips to move in measured pleas rather than in retaliatory defensiveness. She had to stop him, she thought desperately, before he ruined *everything*.

"I can explain. It wasn't what it looked like. Thank you, but it isn't necessary - wait! Please!" she begged when he shook his head and made to dial emergency again. "The thing is, he's my boss, and..."

"That's irrelevant. He assaulted you. The authorities will take him away."

"It's not...I - he's been paying me in cash for some time to work here," she said weakly. She hoped he would understand without her going into too much detail - that she was working for money under the table. Quite illegal, and most definitely punishable by law.

So despite what Richard had just done, she couldn't afford to give him the chance to take her down with him. He was the kind of man who would do such a thing, too,

without a doubt: out of pure spite, he would report to them exactly how much unreported income one of his employees had received over the past eight months.

Forget prison time - there was no way Jia would be able to pay the heaping back taxes the authorities would find out she owed.

And then she would lose Jisu and Jini, too, in the process.

When Atlas Grayson continued to stare at her, she quickly forged ahead, desperately trying to change his mind no matter what it took. "I didn't have a choice," she said. "I have a family. They need me. I didn't know what else to do, and I needed the money fast. Richard had an opening. And everyone else wanted to run credit checks on applicants, and I've never had a credit history. And I don't have my own vehicle, and no one considers the subway-bus route reliable transportation -"

"I'm not interested," the man interrupted. "Tax evasion concerns aside, you do realize that if you don't report this, your boss here will probably end up hurting someone else."

Jia's face immediately twisted in guilty shame, but she continued to hold her ground. She couldn't give in. If there was anything less at stake, she would have been happy to do exactly what she ought to do, but she had so much to lose... "I can't," she insisted. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Save your apologies to whoever he hurts next."

-----Extract from chapt.4

Jia swallowed hard, her memories instantly slip-sliding down the troubled terrain of their last encounter - besides last night, of course. Did that mean he remembered everything? If that was the case, then what was the purpose of all this? Was he making fun of her, setting her up for humiliation?

But no, it hardly seemed his style. Well, not that she would know such a thing intimately - maybe what she meant was, it hardly seemed like something he would be even remotely interested in. He was rich and famous. Surely he had better ways to pass the time than to harass an ordinary blue collar worker?

"I have a copy of your application here, Ms. Moon, as well as your resume. And after last night, I'd like to remind you that you are in no position to be dishonest." Mr. Grayson leaned back in his chair, but he used the fingers of one hand to spread apart the two sheets on the surface of his desk. "Knowing that, I suggest you choose your words carefully."

His electric blue eyes pierced her with all the delicacy of a honed kitchen knife, and Jia found herself quickly reconsidering the response she had been about to give.

“The benefits,” she said, and she suppressed a wince at how blunt she sounded even to herself. “Full time employment with Pandora Lights promises medical and dental coverage for the employee and immediate family.”

He must have known somehow, she thought. The sharp, knowing look he was still giving her told her enough. But that was all she was going to say: even if he wanted specifics, that was all he was getting from her.

Of course, unless he blackmailed her for that information. But surely he couldn't possibly care enough to go to such lengths. He was wasting his time here, and so was she. Unless he really intended to offer her a job, that is.

“A custodial position,” he said. “Why were you interested in that?”

Jia paused at the question for a moment before answering. “All legitimate employment is respectable,” she said carefully.

“I don't mean it in a demeaning way, Ms. Moon.” Atlas tapped the copy of her resume on his desk with two fingers. “You have several years experience in management. The custodial positions here are considered entry level, and the pay reflects that. I find that your experience over-qualifies you.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, and Jia felt a chill run down her spine as if he had just caught her doing something she shouldn't have been. Why was that? She had done nothing wrong. As a matter of fact, he was the villain here - if he were a good, decent man, he wouldn't have coerced her into coming here in the first place.

“I've never actually been in management,” she said softly, daring to contradict him despite her misgivings about doing so. Judging by the way his eyebrow slid up at her objection, he didn't quite like that. “But I find that assisting those in management comes easily, because I enjoy making things easier for those around me.”

Mr. Grayson's chin tilted up slightly, and Jia found herself blinking in surprise. That couldn't have been an expression of approval, could it? It had disappeared in a flash, vaporizing instantly like a wisp of smoke in a hurricane, but she thought...

No. She had just imagined it, Jia decided, because the way he was looking at her was most definitely *not* approving. Cold, more like. Very cold. She shivered.

“If that's the case, then you'll fit well in a position that's just opened.” Mr. Grayson leaned forward to press a round, black button near a corner of his desk. “Lydia.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Grayson, sir?” A woman’s voice, light and bubbly, spoke out of the flat speaker situated next to the button.

“You have an assistant. I’m sending her out to you. Get her trained.”

“I...An assistant, sir? Mine?”

Suddenly, Mr. Grayson’s mouth set in a hard line, and Jia realized he did not like repeating himself. Not one bit. He hadn’t looked happy a minute ago, either, when he had had to repeat his question to her. “Yes,” he said, and the single word made Jia’s toes curl in her shoes with its sheer frigidity. “Is your speaker malfunctioning?”

“N - no, sir!” the woman nearly cried in her haste to rectify the crisis. “I understand, sir. I apologize - yes, sir.”

Mr. Grayson didn’t even wait for the woman to stop stammering her last words, and he lifted his finger from the intercom switch to return his attention to Jia. “Out,” he snapped. “Today’s your first day on the job. You wanted a custodial position, but since there’s none open, you’ll have to make do with cleaning up after one person instead of the entire building.”

He pointed at the double doors leading out of the office when Jia failed to move immediately. “Do I need to repeat myself?” he asked, his voice growing more arctic with each syllable until Jia thought her ears were contracting a viral strain of frostbite.

“No, sir,” she answered, and she was proud that somehow, she didn’t stammer as ‘Lydia’ had. God knew she wanted to.

He had nothing else to say, evidently, and moved her resume and application away to the side of his expansive desk. By the time he drew a stack of papers and folders from one of his drawers, Jia was already halfway out the door. He watched with a discreet eye as she held the handle and controlled the door’s swing; it closed quietly behind her with a near-imperceptible click as the latch slid gently into place.

“The first rule you need to know is that you never ask him any questions. None.”

Jia blinked. “Excuse me?” She looked the other woman up and down, trying to riddle out exactly how serious she was. “Can you repeat that?”

“First rule, section two - don’t ask him to repeat himself. Mr. Grayson hates that.”

Okay, that much Jia had deduced already just moments ago when she had been in his office. His assistant - *my name is Lydia Worthington, a pleasure to meet you* - was standing in front of her with an open binder stocked full with sheets, and she was tracing each line with her index finger as she read aloud the 'rules' of Pandora Lights Agency.

"Rule two, appearances are everything."

Jia drew back in alarm when the other woman gave her a thorough ironing with her eyes.

"For example, this won't do." Lydia wagged her finger rapidly as she pointed it up and down Jia's figure. "Not at all. We have several clothing departments in the building, so we'll stop by for an emergency pick-me-up in a few minutes -"

"Is there something wrong with what I'm wearing?" interrupted Jia. She looked down at the sensible black slacks she wore and pulled at the hem of her white blouse. Sure, maybe a heavily worn pair of women's loafers didn't look so glamorous, but surely the rest of her attire made the cut.

"Where do I start?" Lydia huffed, and she pointed at Jia's hair. "First of all, is that a straight cut? Unacceptable. And that top looks like three different people fought over it in a bargain bin, besides the fact that ruffle collars went out of season, oh, four years ago. And don't get me started on the false buttons, either."

Jia glanced down at the little plastic pieces sewn down the sides of her blouse.

"And slacks? What were you thinking? What, are you going to be working in construction all day?"

Jia frowned, thoroughly confused. Construction? In slacks? And still Lydia continued:

"Heels normally put it all together, but at the same time, your flats are so...rustic, charming. I can see the appeal - like a farmer's daughter. I'd give you points for that." Lydia tapped her chin with her finger as she carefully observed the loafers with a curious but admiring eye. "And the weathered look is so realistic. Well-done, you'll have to tell me where you bought them later. They almost look like they're years old. Very authentic-looking."

Jia's eyes darted shiftily from side to side. Her parents had bought her these from a supermarket when they were still alive eight years ago. She was fairly certain these didn't even have a brand.

"But other than that, atrocious. We can't have you looking this way. You're representing someone who's representing our CEO, Mr. Grayson, and that means you need to look

immaculate at all times.” Lydia turned around to drop the binder on her desk before whipping back around with a determined grimace.

For all her insults, Jia couldn't help the feeling that the woman truly meant well. There was a clear openness in the woman's emerald-green eyes untainted by malice or pettiness. Her voice had been stern rather than jeering, scolding rather than arrogant.