

Chapter One

Asia

“I need a fiancée.” My boss, Jason Johnson, glowers at his computer screen. “By Saturday.”

More scowls. “And today is Thursday, or I don’t get the house,” he mutters.

I, Asia Brown, personal assistant to commitment-phobic billionaire Jason Johnson, CEO and evil mastermind behind Johnson Incorporated, smile inwardly. No, I snort, then gulp air like I’ve swallowed something awful. Maybe a toad.

Good luck.

I place a triple-shot espresso on his desk—no caramel frappalatte for Jason Johnson.

He asked me to arrive before him so I could have his coffee ready, but I flat out refused. If he wants a coffee, he can haul his well-muscled ass out to the machine in the break room and learn how to make it himself. Or visit Starbucks like regular folk. He’d shuddered.

I’m not getting in at five am. Six is barely tolerable. Catching the metro is impossible in Los Angeles.

I put on my blank face as I place the coffee on his desk. “Mr. Johnson, I’ve moved your four to four-thirty. The presentation folders for the Galbraith acquisition are complete.”

By me at eleven-thirty last night.

“Lunch will be in the boardroom at midday. Here’s a personal list of facts for the key players in the meeting.” I hand Jason the paper I’ve spent long nights researching and phoning around the secret phone tree of personal assistants I joined two days into the job.

I slip the folders onto the polished table. “Jack Galbraith plays golf every Wednesday, followed by a massage which comes with a happy ending that his wife Jacqueline turns a blind

eye to.” I flick through the next sheet of paper in my mind. “Jack Chase, the CFO, has a controlling interest in two offshore properties which violate his non-compete and is therefore in breach of contract.” I pause and give him a pointed look. “Emma Galbraith has a political history degree, is ruthless in the courtroom, and detests you.”

Emma lasted four weeks with Jason and thought an announcement was on the horizon, but Jason did what he always did and gave her the, ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech, leaving me to order a tennis bracelet from Tiffany’s, flowers, and be the shoulder to vent or cry on.

“You were overseas for two weeks, but she saw it as a sign she was the one who’d finally captured your dark heart,” I say. “She was picking out ‘save the date’ cards and a dress.”

Jason swears.

I cock my head. “I know, right? How dare she think she meant something to you.”

“I don’t know why I hired you.” He squeezes the back of his neck.

Yeah, well, we both know.

Twelve months ago, when I’d interviewed for the job, I’d sat next to California girls with glossy manes, size D boobs, killer shoes, and clothes I could only dream would end up at Goodwill where they’d be altered into my apparently signature ‘hot school ma’am’ look, according to my bestie Darlene. The Callie girls ignored me and spoke in hushed private school vowels. There I was, the poor cousin from Hicksville in the navy but awesome ankle-grabbing skirt I’d sewn, and a white shirt I’d snagged from the sale rack at Target.

I’d clutched my resume to my chest, worrying my inner cheek with my teeth, after having chewed my way through rolls of antacids.

I'd been planning my next interview—a data entry job in Torrance, Los Angeles. I mean, being a personal assistant, and the money it paid, would be a dream job, but I was realistic about my chances.

“You.”

I'd ignored the deep, rumbling voice that could strip panties from bodies knowing it would be targeted toward one of the Barbies.

I'd been working out the Metro system on my phone when an all-male spicy scent rippled over me. I stared up at six foot plus of tight sculptured muscle. A black business shirt rolled to his elbows showed golden skin. Tousled, thick dark brown hair that you itched to run your hands through. Cheekbones that were sharp, sculptured, and could possibly cut paper and diamonds. A forehead that looked permanently creased like he'd never smiled in his life. Puffy lips that should look feminine highlighted his face. And his eyes? Jesus, his eyes. A deep, stormy brown.

“You've got the job.”

When I'd asked later why he'd hired little old me, feeling quite proud of my resume, his words struck like a slug to the chest.

“I figured you're here for work and not my assets.”

While I'd stood there like a moron, he'd waved an impatient hand. “You wouldn't want to bang me on the boardroom table.”

I blinked, then what he meant took hold, and boy did it take hold.

Translation. *I* don't want to bang *you* on the boardroom table because you're ugly and short.

What every girl wants to hear.

A look of dismay had crossed his face before I scuttled away with my face on fire. Admittedly, it looked like he'd started an apology, but there was only so much humiliation a girl could take in one day. I was not going to stand around and listen to him dig a deeper hole.

When I first started, I'd thought there must be more to the man. No one could be so cold, so detached, so unfeeling, as in, totally devoid of human emotion. I'd spent way too much time hitting up Doctor Google, punching in his personality type, only getting returns on Jeffrey Dahmer, the Son of Sam, and a guy in India who likes to pickle human feet.

How do you find discarded human feet anyway?

Not that I thought Jason would ever harm anyone or pickle random body parts. The only time I've seen any capacity for emotion is if he loses a deal, which is rare. He takes to hurling things against walls when that happens.

I'm itching to crank open his head and see if circuit boards and wires are powering him. I made him a birthday cake last year with his name—minus the N, as I'd run out of room. I'd found the cake in the trash, not a slice eaten. That hurt like little knife nicks to the heart. I'd stayed up all night making it, thinking maybe my world-famous (in my head) chocolate butterball cake could thaw his soul.

Nope.

The man didn't have a soul—his words. I've seen moguls white-faced and wiping their eyes after leaving his boardroom.

Jason turns a pen over in his fingers; something glitters and works behind his dark, coal-wrapped-in-thunder, dipped-in-molasses, then flung-into-outer-space eyes.

“I’ve shifted the seating so Emma Galbraith will be away from you in case she’s brought knives or sharpened pencils—HBs can inflict damage. If she’s into voodoo, I can’t help you. I don’t have enough time to study up on the dark arts.”

Jason says nothing. He stares at me until all the little hairs on my neck stand to attention.

He’s got his weird eyes on. Something’s up.

I know this look. He gets it when he’s going in for a major negotiation, but since the Galbraith meeting is a done deal—to give him his due, Jason is a master negotiator—I don’t know what else there is to negotiate.

“Take a seat,” he says in his rich, bedroom, and ultimately bored voice.

“Why?”

“I want to negotiate something with you.” The Montblanc pen he’s been twiddling like a conductor’s baton now lies still in his fingers.

“Be my fake fiancée for ten days.”

“No.” The word whooshes out of me on a shout of laughter as I rocket to my feet.

Sure, I enjoy needling him with a fake horoscope and song of the day, but we’re not besties. Hell, we aren’t even friends. We have a barely functioning boss/employee relationship. All I know about him comes from the internet (serial dater, wickedly handsome, richer than God, and born without a heart—his words). He’s never asked a single thing about me in the year I’ve worked for him.

He rakes a hand through his thick, messy hair and stares out the window. “I’ve lied to my grandmother about having a fiancée. She hates my lifestyle, and in a hasty move, I told her I’d met someone and asked her to marry me.”

My eyebrows reach for my hairline. “You lied to your grandmother?”

Wow, he's reached a new low.

His perfect features pucker into a scowl. "I lied because I adore her, and I don't want her worrying about me. She's got high blood pressure, and apparently, I'm part of the cause, so, yes, I lied to her."

I'd give anything to have my grandmother back from the grave. I get the devastated look that flashes across his face. I adored the woman who raised me too, but the choice of living my own life and making my own decisions, right or wrong, is a freedom I'll never give up.

"Asia?" His voice lands me back in the room.

I stare straight into his stormy eyes. "Why me? Surely there must be some woman in the known universe you haven't pissed off, shunned, or ghosted?"

Something flashes across his face, and I fight the flinch.

Not one I'd bang on the boardroom table.

A girl has some pride. *This* girl has a lot of pride. "Sorry, I'm washing my hair."

"For ten days?"

"It takes a long time."

It does, it really does. No product can tame the mess. Well, none CVS stocks.

He paces around his office, his long legs eating up space. "Asia Brown, I'm stuck. You're my employee, so, you know, HR and rules."

"I'll check, but I don't think there's a section in the HR manual entitled 'taking your assistant to be your fake fiancée for ten days and the rules and regulations that entails'."

He looms over me, his scent reminding me of a forest after a summer shower, all woody with a hint of spice and him. If I breathe deep, I'll get lost for a second.

“Asia, please. It’s perfect. You’re my employee, which is a line I never cross. Think of it as a vacation. A country vacation. You don’t want to see my grandmother die, do you?”

“Cheap shot from the balcony seats, Mr. Johnson. I’m not the cause of your grandmother’s blood pressure, nor am I going to spend ten days with you outside of work, so the answer is a definite no.” I stand. “Your horoscope for today is: Words that seem harmless will come back to bite you. Act at once. Song of the day is ‘Gamble Everything for Love’.”

I smile at his growl and start planning ten sweet days without my boss.

Chapter Two

Jason

“Are you sure this is the right address?” I crane my head. Not where I expected my assistant to live. Actually, I don’t know much about her apart from she doesn’t take my crap, works hard, has a smart mouth which irritates and occasionally makes me smile, and dresses like a sexy librarian—all high neck, nothing fitting dresses, skirts and shirts in navy, gray, brown and black. Be it a sexy librarian, I imagine bending over to stock the bottom shelf.

I recheck Google Maps and the address from the file I pulled from HR this afternoon. Compton isn’t a part of LA I frequent, but then again, I hate all parts of LA, from where I live in Santa Monica to my office in the downtown district. Give me the smell of grease, lubricant, put a wrench in my hand, and I’ll die a happy man. Car engines are my crack.

But I’m a man on a mission. My grandmother’s email stipulated that her house, the house I grew up in (that I need, but she thinks is the root of all my problems) will be gifted to some ridiculous charity unless I show her I am settling down and, in fact, have a fiancée *and* my past doesn’t haunt me. Ok, so maybe I’d rather sing the national anthem decked out in Buffalo Bills gear on the Patriots side in Orchard Park than admit I have skeletons in my closet—two, to be exact.

Besides, Cynthia has issued a summons that I must attend her soirée. She doesn’t issue direct orders very often, so when she issues this one, I have no choice but to show up with a sparkling fiancée on my arm and looking like a well-rounded human being.

“This is it,” Gabriel Pederson, my driver and Stamford Brook brother confirms. His driving skills are legendary. He’s part of a tightknit brotherhood who attended the same boarding school

on scholarship. Our ties go deep, our loyalty deeper, and our love deeper still. We will drop whatever we are doing for a brother in need.

Gabriel is taking a career break after a stint in the marines, figuring out his path. He needed a job, I needed a driver. A perfect match. I'll miss him like shit, but know that he'll eventually move on. Driving a billionaire asshole (his words and I agree) is not a career path for him.

I glance at the building. Not what I expected. I pay well, so why is Asia living here?

"Do you know Asia?" I ask Gabe, trying to get some sort of inside scoop on her.

"Yeah, everyone knows Asia." He swivels his head. The man is grinning like a fool.

"Have you got a thing for my assistant?" My eyebrows shoot up.

"Everyone has a thing for your assistant." He shakes his head. "She's smart, funny, gorgeous, and kind."

I ignore his comments. "Quick, give me the scoop."

He pats my arm like a child. "You're on your own on this one, brother. You'll have to get to know her."

"I don't want to get to know her. I just need her to do something that will be mutually beneficial." Like get my hands on the deed to the house, a house that I hate and love. It's not like I haven't wanted to visit. I've felt the pull over the years, but remorse and regret, my two best friends, hang out in my heart playing tug-o-war.

Another quick shake of his shaggy head. "I'll circle. Call me when you're ready." Gabriel brings the car to a stop.

Good call. Probably be missing a few car parts—like wheels—if he stops, parks, and comes with.

I step from the Bentley and make my way toward a nondescript apartment block with a group of teens hanging around looking shifty and bored. All turn and stare as I approach. A warm, California winter wind whips my hair, the clouds dark above us, and a rumble of thunder teases the sky.

“You’re in the wrong neighborhood.” A teen pushes off the wall.

“Possibly,” I say, striding up to him. “Do you know if Asia Brown lives here?” Dark, glittering eyes regard me. “She’s about four-foot, dark hair, smart mouth, wears a lot of brown, as in her last name, ironically.”

He’s right in my face. Any regular guy would move away from a group of now pissed-off teens on approach, but I’m not normal, and I’m not going to smack a sixteen-year-old kid or a group of them.

“What you want with Asia?”

“Ah, she does live here.” I bound up the stairs. The main door to the building is open, which pisses me off. There should be some sort of security door.

I make it to the fourth level, barely breaking a sweat, and meet a woman flicking through her mail. She’s standing across from apartment four zero eight—my destination.

Our eyes meet. Her eyes sweep over my suit (handmade), my shoes (same), and she sniffs at my cologne (again, handmade). I take in her five-foot slim frame in denim jeans, green T-shirt. Long, dark hair curls down her back.

“I’m looking for Asia,” I say.

Without breaking eye contact, she takes a step and bangs on Asia’s door.

“Girl, there’s an expensive smelling dude at your door. You want me to toss him?”

I fight a growl and lose.

I don't have time for this shit.

Her dark brows pull in.

“He growled at me. Like I’m a cat.”

“Tell him the answer is no,” Asia replies.

This utterly infuriating woman. If I had anyone else to ask, I would.

“Off you go.” Her eyes are back to sorting her mail, but her body is tense. She positions herself in front of Asia’s door.

“Asia,” I speak to the paint-peeling blue door. “I have to talk to you. It’s important.”

“Say it,” her singsong voice calls from the other side of the thin door.

“What?” I ask, perplexed.

“That one little word.” I know she’s smiling.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“What are we, twelve?” I mumble.

Her neighbor cocks her head. “Manners will get you a long way in life, my momma always said.”

Yeah, well, I haven’t had a momma for twenty-three years.

“Please,” I say.

A ping from my pocket has me reaching for my phone, and my typically sixty heart beats a minute climbs. Maybe Gabe has been jacked.

“Wasn’t so hard, was it?” Asia leans a shoulder against the doorframe.

I look up from my phone and do a double-take.

Holy shit.

This is not the woman who makes sure my presentations are perfection, who is best friends with all the secretaries in the building and possibly the universe. The same woman I hired because I'm not going to be sued, or who'd want to bang me on the boardroom table. Five had already tried.

Her hair, which I've never seen out of a tight bun (which gives her face a slightly pinched look like it hurts), is now a mass of dark brown curls around her face and cascading down her back. My gaze drops to a tiny pair of denim cut-off shorts she must've stolen from Barbie. They barely cover her firm thighs.

Jesus.

My eyes linger on her pink toenails for a second, then rake up her tiny frame to a pink camisole that molds across her chest.

I dig my hand through my hair.

She's fucking gorgeous, and my assistant, so end of conversation.

Her head swings to something behind her, then back to me. "Oh shit. Catch."

My hands automatically catch a bundle of tabby fur.

"Hey, buddy." The cat proceeds to climb from my arms and perch on my shoulder like I'm some sort of pirate.

"I'm sorry. Blossom, come here." Adorable pink slashes Asia's cheeks. "She launches herself at people like a missile."

"Blossom?" I reach up and pet the cat's head, noting stumps where her ears used to be.

Poor baby.

"Yeah, I figured she needed a pretty name. Blossom has been in a few battles, hence the no ears, half a tail, and missing teeth."

A smile that could melt Antarctica transforms my assistant. Her hazel eyes sparkle, her pillowy pink lips tilt upwards, and, I swear, her entire body gets in on the deal.

I'm mute like a fifteen-year-old who has hacked his dad's premium porn account with my figurative dick hanging out of my pants.

I've never seen her smile like that, and never at me.

"Thanks, Darlene." She squeezes the mail flicker's shoulder, and I follow Asia into her apartment.

"You've got terrible taste in music."

Her eyes widen. "You cannot *not* like 'Midnight Train to Georgia', that's like illegal in all fifty-two states and territories."

I bite back a smile. It's an awesome song, admittedly, but not on my playlist, being more of a podcast person. My boarding school dean's words float into my head. *Never stop learning. The minute you do, someone will be there to take your place.*

That someone is my twin brother who should be here. His and my mom's lives aren't celebrated, no flowers laid where their ashes are scattered. Forgotten by everyone but me.

I push back the black dog who snarls on its chain in my mind. The fucker always lurks. There's not a day that's gone past since I was seven that I don't see my brother's smile, hear his laughter, then freeze when he screams.

As if my father can sense my mood, I swipe open my phone at an incoming text. My mood sours to outer space dark when I read it.

BEFAF or Biological excuse for a father: Running a bit low on cash. Investment didn't pan out, I will pay you back.

I shove the phone back in my pocket. He hasn't paid me back the half a mill I've already lent him and never will. I used to think he wanted to reach out to his only living child. That died a long, drawn out, painful death. I should block his number, but a useless part of me holds out hope he'll send a text asking to grab a coffee. Yeah, I know, I need an exorcism.

I walk around Asia's apartment, my hand on the back of the cat in case she falls. At six-two, it's a drop.

A queen-sized bed is covered in a ridiculous number of colorful cushions. I pass a sewing machine; fabric is heaped over every available surface, including a TV in the corner on an old wooden box. Nothing matches, everything's old, but it works—a small kitchen with a stove, a fridge, and a tiny table with two chairs. I frown at the half-eaten instant noodles on the counter. Framed prints of Vogue magazine covers on the walls. I want nothing more than to sink on her worn yellow couch for five minutes. It looks way more inviting than my top of the line sofa that an interior decorator said matched the gray and black monochrome. It could be hot pink for all I care. I spend as little time at my apartment as I can.

“Mr. Johnson, I assume you're here to discuss your pressing problem and not my excellent taste in music. The answer is no. I'm not going to pretend to be your fake fiancée so you can get off the hook with your grandmother. Why don't you fess up and admit to her you'll never settle down?”

I ignore the Mr. Johnson comment because it pisses me off and turns me on when she says it in a low, throaty voice, like now. I turn from checking out a weird collection of tiny plastic toys. I pick up a helicopter and spin the rotor.

“Kinder Egg toys.” At my apparently blank face, she continues. “You know, Kinder Egg, right?”

“No.”

“My sister and I used to collect them when we were kids.” Her hazel eyes mist. “It’s a nice childhood memory.”

“Being a child is only a necessity to become an adult.” I don’t dwell on my childhood, ever.

She shakes her head. “There you are, Mr. Cyborg.”

The cat is getting restless, judging by the claws massaging my shoulders. I gently lift her to the ground.

I get to the point of the visit, already bored and itching to hit my private gym. If I work out hard enough, maybe I’ll get a few hours of sleep tonight. “I’ll pay you fifty K for the ten days.”

Her mouth drops open, and it’s all I can do to run my gaze over her curves. God, I want to bury my face in her hair and sleep there for a week. It’s a riot of curls, and I itch to run my fingers through it and see if it is as soft as I imagine. She always wears it up in a tight bun which makes her look older than twenty-five.

I read her face. Shock, surprise, then her eyebrows pull in.

I jolt.

God, if she thinks I’m doing this to sleep with her, she’s wrong. She’s the best assistant I’ve ever had. She puts up with me, makes me smile occasionally with her stupid horoscopes and even stupider song titles about lonely people.

As if.

It’s not like I can ask any of the women I date. They’d either hang up on me, send a sniper, or think we were getting back together. I like women, enjoy their company, but I have no plans *ever* of settling down behind a white picket fence. The dog and kids make my stomach roll.

Work is my thing, and I'm good at making money. One day, maybe one day, if I make enough money, I'll look in the mirror and like what I see.

"One hundred thousand," she says with her hands behind her back, her chin tilted, and her hazel eyes piercing mine. "With conditions."

Now it's my turn to look surprised. "What do you need a hundred K for?" I ask. Curious, I look around. "Got it, you want out of here."

Most of my money goes to charity, which I keep on the down low. Being a ruthless, cut-throat bastard keeps competitors edgier when they walk into negotiating a deal with me. Suits me fine.

"We should keep things impersonal."

"You're right," I reply, and truth be told, I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm not into relationships. Outside of my boarding school friends who group text, I like my own company, which is why her daily comment about me being lonely pisses me off. I'm not lonely. I love being alone.

"Good, so we have a tentative deal." I stuff my hands into my pockets, holding in the grin. The easiest deal I've ever made. "We'll keep it simple, set some rules, then have a quiet breakup soon after we get back."

She sits down on her couch and pulls a notebook toward her; its white cover is adorned with sketches of dresses.

I glance around the room again, taking in a mannequin in a green dress I'd missed in the corner. I move a bunch of pins stuck in a sponge from the sofa and sit myself next to her. I'd sit across from her if she had another chair. It's far easier to negotiate when my head is not lost in a

fog of coconut and vanilla. Is it oozing from her pores like nectar or wafting from the mass of hair?

“Are these your designs?” I ask, distractedly looking at the open notebook. Her sofa is tiny, and my leg presses against her warm, firm thigh. It’s distracting.

“Impersonal, remember?” She shifts in her seat, causing the ribbon thing on her top to slip down her arm. My traitorous eyes shoot to the gift of her chest and the perfect handful of breasts pressing against purple lace.

Jesus.

“Yep,” I reply, gruffer than I intended. My mind may agree, but my dick doesn’t and salutes like the soldier he is.

She flicks the notebook until she gets to a blank page.

“Public displays of affection only when vital.” I snatch the notebook and write it down.

“Nothing makes me want to vomit more than displays of affection, especially in public.”

She grabs the notebook back. “Agreed. Though I love seeing a couple really in love swept up in the moment, or a man holding my hand just because.”

I make a gagging sound.

She shoots me a withering look, and I swear the temperature in the room drops. “No kissing.” She writes in her proper script.

I look at her kissable lips. “I agree in principle, but to be convincing, there may be times when we have to kiss. We *are* supposed to be engaged.”

The cat weaves between my legs. I scratch her head, tracing over the bumps and hollows on her head. She arches her back and leans into me. At least one female in the room likes me.

I snatch the notebook back and scrawl, *no tongue with kissing or anything else.*

The thought of dominating her mouth makes me smile.

“You’ve got your weird eyes on. Stop it.” She snatches the notepad back. “No going off for trysts, however discreet you may be.”

“For both of us.” I give her a pointed look to which she rolls her eyes.

I snatch the notebook back. “No sex.”

Her face pinks. “Well, of course, no sex. That’s a given.” She nibbles on her bottom lip.

“But by yourself is okay, right? Or with a discreet battery boyfriend.”

Now it’s my turn for my mouth to hang open. I imagine this curvy bundle of woman getting herself off with her hand or vibrator.

My suit’s uncomfortably small and hot. Boiling hot. I clutch the back of my neck and look down, fighting the image forming in my head.

She shoulder-bumps me. “Kidding,” she laughs.

I expel a big breath from my now-tight chest. “If you don’t stay for the whole ten days, the deal is off.”

I want to get out of this room and far, far away, like the Arctic Circle where I can chill off.

“Fair enough.” Her lips are thin. Her flat eyes catch mine.

She’d rather cozy up with Satan himself than spend ten days playing my loved-up fiancée.

“This arrangement is to stay in this room. No one at work needs to know. I don’t shit where I work.”

“Agreed. The look of horror on my friends’ faces that I’d made a pact with the devil. I’d rather go on *Naked and Afraid*.”

I have no idea what she means, but a large part of my brain would love to see her naked; the other part hates that she'd ever feel afraid. "Sign here. I'll have a proper contract drawn up tomorrow."

She takes the notebook, adds a few lines here and there, then signs her name. "This is fine. I won't break my word." She tilts her stubborn chin. "Will you break your word, Mr. Johnson?"

"No, I fucking won't." I stride toward the door. "I expect you to be a *very* convincing fiancée, Ms. Brown."

"I'll be all over you like a rash."

Jesus, it's going to be a long ten days.

"Tomorrow, we're going to Montana."