

CHAPTER ONE

This is it. Pamela Weston raised her chin, tightened her hands into fists, and stepped into the small metal box that would launch her up to the fiftieth floor for her next assignment. Pam detested elevators, but she'd managed to psych herself into using them during her six month tenure at Peterson Enterprises, since taking the elevator up to the executive level had proved a necessity. Though she was no stranger to supplying directors with administrative assistance, and had faked her way through two-week rotations, this time she'd been ordered to report to the CEO. Robert Peterson was no fool, so Pam suspected it was only a matter of time before he discovered just how unqualified she was to work in his company and fired her.

To her mind, the sexy executive was a sharp, handsome thirty-something man who'd made millions through his internationally famous public relations firm. Though the busy CEO was quick to censure an employee who didn't measure up to his expectations, Pam couldn't say he was unfair, or hesitant to offer a compliment when he judged an achievement worthy of praise. Even so, she didn't consider him lavish in dispensing his appreciation. She'd witnessed the way he interacted with his assistants and politely greeted his guests, so she characterized him as an exacting employer, but reasonable; coolly congenial, yet distant. However, he had an uncanny way of getting to the root of people's motivations, as if the future was laid out before him. Taking a deep breath for courage, she knocked on his open office door and prepared for the worst, but he barely raised his head to acknowledge her.

"Mr. Peterson. I'm Pamela Weston. HR sent me up here to serve as your temp."

He gave a nod, but his attention remained focused on his work. "Do you know who Krista Rensler is?"

"Yes, sir." Krista had been an invaluable resource for Pam during her earlier assignments.

"Good. Ask her to bring you up to speed, Miss Weston. I have neither the time nor the patience to train administrative assistants in office procedures. Shut the door when you leave, please."

His dismissal acted like a slap in her face, which she was certain had turned a bright shade of red to accompany the heat of her cheeks. "Yes, sir," she murmured again, uncertain if it was relief or fear that prompted her to quickly close his door and seek out Krista.

Krista Rensler was an attractive, well-dressed, green-eyed blonde who, after five years of assisting the upper management of Peterson Enterprises, had an excellent grasp of the inner workings of the executive floor. No matter how busy she might be, Krista always had a smile on her face and a willing disposition to help. When Pam admitted she suspected Mr. Peterson was less than pleased at having another temporary to deal with, Krista gave her a conspiratorial grin

"Mr. Peterson is not in the best of moods this morning. Just ignore him. He's got a loud growl, but he doesn't bite as long as you don't rattle his cage."

Pam returned Krista's smile, though she was far from persuaded cage-rattling was the only provocation that caused the devilishly handsome CEO to bite as Krista went on to reel off the man's impressive catalogue of contacts and rigid requirements. He maintained categories of individuals with whom he didn't wish to speak—ever, as well as those she should always inform him were on the line. A Mrs. Peterson sat at the top of his "always notify" list, but Pam learned that woman was his mother. Mr. Peterson, it seemed, preferred to play the field rather than settle down with any one lady.

With her head bent close, Krista told Pam about Celine, who also ranked high on Peterson's roster. "This one is a bitch of the first water, but Peterson still insists on talking to her whenever she calls, although I have no idea why. From the way he scowls after their conversations, I don't think he even likes her."

All the other names appeared to be business associates. However, grouped on the 'do not disturb list' were an extensive number of females.

Pointing at one name in particular, Krista whispered, "I think he was dating Donna for a while, and there were rumors the relationship might be serious, but then I heard she stepped out on him, so he dumped her. She still calls on occasion, and doesn't always leave her name. Whatever you do, don't put her through unless you harbor a secret desire to see a human volcano."

"I thought you said he's all growl."

"Mostly, although I swear he spouts fire from his ears and nose every now and then. You serve as his sword and shield. Trust me, these women will do anything they can to get past you, but you need to stand firm."

Pam was beginning to doubt her ability to hold back the horde when the phone rang. "It's an outside call on the Peterson Enterprises line," she murmured unnecessarily. Aware of the

three-ring-rule, Pam picked up then glanced down to note the number was not on any of the lists Krista gave her. The rule on the executive floor was that all calls needed to be answered before the third ring. Any assistant who failed to meet that expectation would need an excellent reason. They were also supposed to cover for each other, so if one messed up, the rest of them suffered the lash of Mr. Peterson's tongue along with the original bungler.

Adopting a more professional mien, Pam answered, "Peterson Enterprises, Mr. Peterson's office. How may I help you?"

"You can put me through to Rob right away, sweetie. That's how you can help me."

Pam's eyebrows rose, but she kept her tone polite and proficient. "May I ask who is calling?"

"Ask away, but if you don't tell Mr. Peterson to pick up his phone in three seconds, he is going to have a huge legal mess on his hands."

"One moment, please." Pam placed the woman on hold and stared at Krista. "Do you recognize her?"

"No, but I wouldn't put her through. Tell her Mr. Peterson is in a meeting and will call her back. Then, ask for a number where she can be reached."

Pam did exactly as she was told, but the woman merely called her a bitch and hung up. After that, Pam's stomach curled into a tight knot. She'd been there less than an hour, and she'd already screwed up. Krista gave her an understanding smile and a pat on the shoulder then continued filling her in.

Seconds later, Robert Peterson stepped out with his cell phone pressed to his ear. "I think you're being a little overly-dramatic, my dear, but I'll check." He redirected his attention to the two of them. "Did either of you speak to Celine a few minutes ago?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Pam answered. "A woman called, insisting I connect her, but refused to give her name."

Peterson regarded Krista with a raised eyebrow and Krista shrugged. "She didn't use any of her established numbers, and I didn't recognize the voice, sir, so I told Pam to take a message."

"Thank you," he replied curtly, before returning to his office. "Celine, if you wish to speak with me, you either need to leave your name, or call me on my cell. Yes, I realize that's what you just did. Now, stop crying and tell me what happened that's gotten you so upset." At

that point, the door closed with a decisive click, and Pam and Krista's part in the conversation was over.

"She's going to be added to the 'do not disturb' list very soon, and he'll be requesting a new number. They get anxious like that, and he detaches. Lesson one: he can't abide clingy, tearful women. He sounds all sweetness and patience, but her ass is grass. Wait and see."

They returned to his files and organization scheme, during which Krista showed Pam menus from the places he often requested his luncheon appointments be made as well as those he frequented for takeout, in addition to what he ordered and how he preferred his meals prepared.

About a half-hour later, he came out again. "I'll be out for the rest of the afternoon. Cancel and rebook all my meetings and type up Caroline's notes on the Hemley file, Miss Weston. I'll expect them on my desk first thing tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Pam answered, having no idea what the Hemley file was but hoping Krista could direct her.

After offering them both a nod, he walked out, and Pam was finally able to take a breath. She smiled a little uneasily at Krista. "Why do I get the impression he's going to rip me a new one every time he looks at me?"

Krista laughed. "He comes across that way sometimes, but he was always civil to Caroline."

"What happened? To Caroline, I mean."

Krista shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure, but I think her boyfriend began to suspect she was doing more on her late nights here than taking dictation. The police came to speak with Mr. Peterson yesterday. Next thing I know, she turned in her resignation."

"Was her boyfriend right? Were they doing more?"

"He's a strict perfectionist, who prefers to keep his pleasure separate from his business. Were they lovers? I can't honestly say. I got the feeling she was in love with him, but I never saw him be anything but professionally polite with her. He didn't seem all that upset when he let her go. In fact, he looked a little relieved, though he offered to give her a reference if she wanted one from him."

"Does he write his recommendations for former employees or give the work to his assistant?"

"I've seen him do both. If it's to be a form letter stating her period of employment and administrative function as his admin, he'll delegate. In this case, he'll probably dictate what he wants, and you'll type it up for his signature. If, by any chance, he asks you to write the recommendation for him, talk to me, and we'll work on it together."

"I really appreciate all your assistance, Krista."

"No problem," she replied with an infectious grin.

"So, how many days does it usually take HR to hire a replacement?"

Krista frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I was sent up here as an emergency fill-in, so I wondered how long I'd be working for Mr. Peterson before someone permanent was hired."

Krista laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure HR thinks that Mr. Peterson will be open to interviewing 'more qualified' candidates, but the truth is, unless you do something he finds totally unacceptable, I'd say you've got the job. He's not a huge proponent of change, and he hates breaking in anyone new, so you're the new chief's admin."

"But, why not you? You clearly know what he likes and doesn't like, and this position would be a promotion for you, wouldn't it?"

Krista blushed. "Let's just say I admire him as a boss, but I don't care much for the regime he institutes with his assistants. He tried it out on me, and I told him off. Big time. I'm sort of surprised he didn't fire me after some of the things I said, but he simply ordered me to find another replacement and sent me back to my previous position. And, nearly two years later, here you are."

"Oh," Pam wanted to ask more, but, from Krista's reaction, she sensed her questions wouldn't be welcome.

"Besides, I like Mr. White. He's married, completely in love with his wife, and a real teddy bear. So, I wasn't interested in a new position, despite the raise in pay. Mr. Peterson is strict, demanding, and at times thoroughly unreasonable. But, he's the boss, so he gets to be that way, I guess. If I had to sum it up in a sentence, I'd say our working philosophies don't mesh. You'll probably understand in a week or so, and he'll let you decide which direction you wish to take."

"Sounds ominous," Pam admitted.

"I don't mean to sound that way, but his relationship with his assistants is irregular and not a management style HR would support, which is why he leaves it up to the admin to determine whether she will accept his terms or find employment elsewhere."

"What? He'll fire someone if they choose not to—whatever?"

"I'm still here, but I can't work directly for him any longer. I view his unusual approach as a condition for serving as Mr. Peterson's assistant. I don't want to say more, because, after all the flak I gave him, he may have altered the way he does things. It's his choice."

"Great. Something else to look forward to. I have another question. Why the two phone lines, and what's Robite Capital?"

"That's right. You've only worked for Peterson Enterprises before today, so this is all new to you. Robite is short for Rob and White, and Capital is another thing these two guys do. They invest in companies, like Hemley Solutions, that need extra help with their finances through a private equity firm. Mr. Peterson wanted to keep the two separate, but he's a general partner of Robite, and the CEO of Peterson Enterprises, thus—two lines. Everyone else on this floor works for either Robite or Peterson Enterprises, so we don't need to worry about which way we answer. Only you get that challenge."

"Wonderful. Good thing I love challenges. So, most of what I'll be doing here is working for Robite?"

"Probably. Helping other companies achieve their goals is one of Rob's dreams. The PR Marketing Firm is merely another way to make money, and his general manager runs it. Hemley Products is a potential Robite investment. From what I've heard, it's a go except for the final paperwork and contract signing."

"Mr. Peterson said he wanted me to type up Caroline's notes, but I'm not sure what he meant. Can you show me what I'm supposed to do?"

"Sure, after lunch. If you work the same way he does, you'll never take a break."

"It's okay. I'm not hungry."

"Nope. I'm not going to let you start that way. You can bring back food if you want, but get something from the lunchroom and we'll go through the Hemley file this afternoon."

Left with little choice, Pam took the elevator down to the cafeteria and selected a salad. She normally didn't eat lunch, but Krista was insistent. Then, later, Krista helped Pam decipher Caroline's notes before she returned to her own desk to finish up while Pam transcribed.

Fascinated by the new world she'd entered, the deeper Pam got into the intricacies of the assignment, the more invested she became. These companies weren't only pieces of paper in a file; they were living, breathing entities, who had run into problems. So, Pam didn't just transcribe another person's notes, she delved into the reasons why the company had fallen on such hard times and lost herself in her work.

Though Pam had no idea how late it was when Krista stopped by to check on her, she recalled answering she was good, just concentrating. But, of course, Krista wasn't content to leave the conversation there.

"Well, don't get too caught up. It's five thirty and most everyone, except your boss, goes home at this hour. How much more would you say you have left to do?"

With a sigh, Pam flipped through the pages. "Only an hour or so. I'm fine. You go on ahead, and I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks again for your help."

"You do realize simply because he asks you to finish something by the next morning, he doesn't expect you to kill yourself?"

"I know, but I hate to leave things hanging. It drives me crazy, and not in a good way. I shouldn't be long at all. Don't worry."

Krista shook her head, but left her to finish working up Caroline's notes. Pam was deep in her review of the Hemley profile when Mr. Peterson's phone rang. After a second of scowling at the rude object for interrupting her, she glanced at the clock. *Eight thirty? That can't be right.* Another ring. Not recognizing the number, she picked up the receiver and answered, "Peterson Enterprises. This is Mr. Peterson's office. How may I help you?" Silence. "Hello?" Ominous silence.

Alarmed, Pam started to hang up the phone when a low, quiet voice asked, "What are you still doing there at this hour, Miss Weston?"

The growl sent a small chill up her spine. "I was finishing up the Hemley file, Mr. Peterson. Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

"Tell me what time it is."

"Eight thirty, sir."

"Well, the clocks aren't broken. Did you break for dinner, at least?"

"Pardon me, sir?"

"Dinner. The evening meal. You do know what dinner is, don't you, Miss Weston?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you consume any?"

"Um.... No, sir."

"That's unacceptable. Stop where you are, pack up, and go home."

"But, I—"

"That's an order, Miss Weston, not a request. Eat something nutritious. I want you to block out my calendar between nine and eleven tomorrow, during which time you and I will discuss my expectations regarding your responsibilities to me and the company. And, since the primary purpose of your job is to assist me, I expect you to do exactly as I say. So, the order I'm giving you is to leave the office. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sir. But...."

Silence, then a sigh. "Go on."

Though his words encouraged her to continue, his tone definitely did not. He sounded truly put out with her. Why would he care whether she was still at work or stopped for dinner?

"I haven't quite finished transcribing the notes on the Hemley file, yet, sir."

"How much time do you need?"

Good question. She'd already be done if all she did was type. "About another half-hour, sir."

"Fine. You may come in one half-hour early to finish it tomorrow, but I do not want you there a minute longer, tonight. Collect your things, Miss Weston. "

Feeling a little numb, Pam suspected further argument would only get her in trouble with her new boss, so she did as he commanded. Uncertain what he would say next, she replied, "I have my purse, sir."

"Good. Place the Hemley folder in your desk and lock it. Now, please."

Her hands shaking, she laid the dossier in her top drawer and locked it. The mechanism made a terrible ratcheting sound that echoed with all the delicacy of a prison lockdown in the unnatural silence of the office. Unnerved by the image, Pam started to tremble then scolded herself for her overactive imagination.

"Excellent. Is anyone else there?"

She glanced around. The place was deserted. "No, sir. At least I don't think so. Security is still here I suspect."

"How do you get home?"

"I take the bus, sir."

"One moment." He put her on hold, and Pam waited. Did she break another one of his unwritten rules? Was she going to be fired and escorted out of the building? That didn't seem likely since he said she could come in early tomorrow, but she'd never had an employer speak with her in such a cold, dominant tone. She was almost done, so why wouldn't he let her stay and finish her work? She heard a small click, then "Pam?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I called David in security and asked him to see you home in one of my cars. He's a good driver, and will see you safely delivered to your door."

"Miss Weston?" Looking up, Pam saw an elderly uniformed guard waiting for her at the end of the hall. "Mr. Peterson asked me to drive you back to your apartment, miss."

She nodded, her throat suddenly tight. The walls were closing in on her, trapping her in a corner with no way out. A man in uniform waited to escort her. He was there to place her back into solitary confinement. No. She would go mad if they placed her on suicide watch again. Her breath coming in rapid gasps, she rubbed the inside of her phone arm and remained in her chair, fingers locked around the receiver, unable to walk away.