

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.

CHAPTER TWO

"What's wrong, Pam?" Robert Peterson asked, his voice much gentler.

Pam shook her head, her breathing fast and shallow. "Nothing. I'm sorry, sir."

"Take a deep breath," he urged, his manner calm and reassuring. She took a breath. Though hardly deep, it was the best she could offer for the moment.

"Surely you can do better. Another one."

She tried to do as she was told, wondering why the CEO of Peterson Enterprises was wasting his time by giving her breathing lessons.

"Still not very satisfactory." Though the words were a rebuke, his tone was teasing as if he smiled while he spoke. "Breathe using your diaphragm. Place your hand just below your rib cage." She glanced down the hall. The guard hadn't moved any closer, nor did he seem at all surprised by the delay. She pressed a shaking hand to her abdomen and waited.

"Breathe in a way that pushes out your hand. Yes, that's it. Now another," he ordered once she'd managed to obey. "Good. Calmer?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know?"

"I have my ways, but, in this case, I heard you hyperventilating. I'm not angry with you, Pam. I'm simply being firm so you will follow my instructions without argument. Is David still waiting for you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Do you own a cell phone?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, we'll see to that tomorrow, too. There's a telephone in my car. Write down this number." He rattled off ten numbers, including the area code. "Once you get settled, call me. You're safe, Pam, and you're not in any trouble. All right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good girl. Hang up and dial me back once you're in the car. Can you do that?"

It didn't seem like an awful lot to ask, and yet she hesitated to rise from her chair, which was perfectly ridiculous. The guard was simply seeing her home, not escorting her into solitary confinement or locking her behind bars. She was being looked after, not punished, but she wasn't used to anyone caring for her, either. Her fingers skimmed along a ridge on her inner arm as she stared at her top drawer. Maybe she could slip the file into her purse and continue working on it at home.

"Pam?"

"Yes?"

"Hold on." Pam saw David talk on his phone for a minute before he nodded and walked toward her. *Shit*. Everything inside urged her to flee, but she gripped the receiver and sat perfectly still while the uniformed guard held out his mobile to her. A soft whimpering sound echoed through the open room. Was someone hurt or in pain?

"Take David's cell, Pam," Mr. Peterson insisted, his tone quiet, but firm.

She watched the other man for a moment, but his expression remained friendly and

encouraging. Finally doing what her boss requested, she put the mobile device to her other ear.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, her voice trembling and uncertain. He spoke in stereo now, causing Pam to wonder if he could hear her heart pounding in her chest from either of the phones in her hands.

"Good. I'm with you. Next, I want you to hang up the office phone."

Closing her eyes, she obeyed as she gasped for air. With her lungs constricting until she found it difficult to breathe, Pam severed the line. A part of her realized she behaved like a panicked pansy, but she still clutched the cell, grateful for the lifeline he'd tossed her nonetheless.

"All right. Did you collect everything you need to take home with you?"

"No, sir."

"What else do you require?"

"I'd like to take the Hemley file with me, sir, so I can work on it at home."

"Absolutely not. You are done for the day. If I find out you disobeyed me in this, you will discover firsthand what it means to earn my displeasure, and you don't want to do that this early in our association, I assure you."

His tone had regained some of its earlier harshness. A scared, pain-filled whimpering started to echo through the area again, which Pam belatedly realized came from her throat. She was losing it. Big time. "Yes, sir."

"Good girl," he murmured, his manner gentle and reassuring again. "You're doing fine. Now, get up and follow David. Once you rise from your chair, he'll lead you to my car while I continue talking with you."

Pam rose, clutching the guard's cell phone to her ear and her purse to her side.

"Perfect."

How could he tell what she did? She glanced around uneasily for a camera.

"What is it?" he asked, as if speaking to a frightened child. Unfortunately, his assessment wasn't far-off.

"How did you know I was doing what you asked? Can you see me?"

He chuckled. "No. You're not on closed-circuit television. I discerned a change in your breathing and deduced what you were doing. Where are you now?"

"We're at the elevators."

"Okay, I may lose you temporarily. Sometimes the equipment in the elevator interferes with cell phone reception, but I don't want you taking the stairs."

"Why not?"

"Because you're on the fiftieth floor, Miss Weston. Assuming no one else is working late, the elevators should go straight down, but tell David I want him to make it an express."

"Mr. Peterson requests you make the elevator an express, David."

"No problem, Miss Weston."

"Good." A soft ding sounded, and the doors whooshed open, but Pam didn't move.

"Go on inside. If you lose me, it will only be for a moment. The phone will not disconnect."

"Are you sure?" she asked, wincing at the tiny, childlike sound of her own voice. She would surely be fired after this.

"I'm positive. I've had a few calls go silent on me in the elevator, but they picked right up once I stepped out. So, go on."

Realizing she was wasting a CEO's valuable time, but not willing to question why he was

even bothering with such a basket case, Pam closed her eyes, took a step inside the moving box, and grasped the rail with her free hand. She'd worked herself into a full-blown panic mode, and for absolutely no reason. The world wasn't coming to an end. No one was out to hurt or confine her. Not here. Eyes shut, Pam remained silent until another ding signaled they'd reached their destination and she quickly left the metal conveyance.

"Very good," he praised, and though his words lightened her step, she still chided herself for her lack of control. Who would want a Nervous Nellie like her for an assistant?

"Stop it," he ordered at once in a sharp voice.

Pam came to an immediate halt. "Stop what?"

"You're fretting yourself into another panic. Calm down. We'll discuss everything tomorrow, and I have no intention of firing you, so quit worrying."

She wanted to ask him how he'd deduced that as well, but figured he could sense her unease even over the phone. She'd had no idea anyone could be as attuned to another person as he seemed to be. Despite having only worked with him for a day, she felt like he'd known her for years.

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David pressed the button on the keys to unlock the car, and Pam started to walk again.

"Good girl," Peterson said softly, and she smiled, though her hands shook.

"I'm such a baby," she confessed uneasily as David opened the rear door for her.

"No, you're not, and I don't want you talking that way, either. Putting yourself down is a punishable offense."

"What?" she asked, nearly tripping as she slipped onto the soft, black leather seat of the dark blue Mercedes.

"My rules will be another thing we'll speak about tomorrow. In the meantime, tell me how you liked working with Krista Rensler."

The change in subject surprised her. "Don't I need to tell David where I live, sir?"

"No. He's got your address. All you need to do is talk to me, and I want to know your feelings about Krista."

Frowning, Pam admitted, "I like her. She's honest, forthright, and helpful."

"Yes, she is. I admire those qualities about her, too."

"How does David know where to go, sir?"

An uncomfortable silence greeted her for a moment, followed by a soft sigh. "Your address is in your personnel file."

Oh. Of course it was. He's the boss, so he had access to all her information, including...." Her breath caught in a gasp.

"Yes, I was aware you'd been in prison before I employed you."

"Except I was hired by HR."

"With my approval."

A lump formed in her throat. "Do you have my medical records, too?"

Pam struggled through another moment of uncomfortable silence. "If I did, I would've had to obtain them illegally, so I'm going to answer no to your question."

That meant he had those, too. So he knew about her breakdown as well as the reason she'd been sentenced to five years in prison. Though she'd been released on parole after three, she still had eighteen months remaining on her sentence, and yet he'd employed her when few others would even consider interviewing her.

None of this made sense. "Did you know HR was sending me to work for you, sir?"

"Yes. Truth be known, I requested you."

Her breath caught in her throat. "Why?"

"Why not? You're a hard worker, and I had a long talk with the prison warden as well as your counselor and their staff psychologist, all of whom were quite protective of you. More than they would be for just anyone, which told me a lot."

"Did you know I'd still be in the office tonight, sir? Were you setting me up to fail, Mr. Peterson?"

"Not precisely. However, I was giving you an opportunity to do what comes naturally. I was advised you tended to overwork and lose track of time when left to your own devices, and Krista mentioned needing to insist you stop for lunch. From what I've seen of your work, you're bright and curious, so I figured you would delve into the Hemley file once you started. Since I ordered you to have Caroline's notes transcribed by morning, I predicted you would stay until you completed my request, after you sated your own curiosity. Was I wrong?"

"No, sir," she admitted. Unnerved by how easily he had read her, Pam sat back on the seat and considered everything he said before finally adding, "I don't like leaving things unfinished."

"Neither do I, so I'm hoping we can help each other. If I'm going to ride herd on you to ensure you take proper care of yourself, it would be hypocritical of me not to hold myself to the same standard. It's a win-win. I would have called earlier, but circumstances prevented it."

"So, you weren't angry with me for staying late?"

"I didn't say that. A part of me was angry, but more with myself than you. I let you continue with a harmful habit, much longer than I intended, only to yank you out and send you into a panic."

He truly did understand her. Perhaps a little too clearly. If she continued to work for him, she'd need to agree to his conditions, but she still didn't know what those were. "Krista said she'd told you off."

He laughed. "Yes, she did. I like Krista a lot, and I trust her judgment, but we didn't make a good team."

"May I ask why not?"

"Because despite being highly qualified for the position and someone I considered a likely candidate, she had personal issues with my methods, which meant we couldn't work well together."

Realizing she encroached on a topic she had no business discussing, Pam backtracked. "But you think we'll work well together, sir?"

"Yes, I do. In fact, I am far more certain of it now than I was this morning."

"And why is that, sir?"

His pause was so long this time, she thought he would refuse to answer, but then he said, "Because you let me talk you down from a full-fledged panic over the phone. You listened to me, despite your fear, and did exactly as I directed. You struggled to do everything I wanted and expected, even to your own detriment."

"Except you didn't like that."

"I admire your dedication, Pam, but I'm going to break your habit of overworking by showing you how to get the same results without pushing yourself to exhaustion."

"You said you didn't have the time or patience to train me."

"I don't. Not in office procedures. But you'll find I excel in teaching my assistants how to manage their lives so they are healthier and happier."

She glanced out the window, surprised to find them pulling up to her apartment.

"We're here," she said absently.

"Good. Just stay on the phone with me until David walks you to your door."

"He doesn't need to see me upstairs, sir. It's not that late."

"This is my decision, not yours, Miss Weston. Tell me again what your job is."

"To assist you, sir," she answered softly.

"And how do I expect you to fulfill your obligations to me?"

"By following your orders."

"Correct. So, get out of the car and allow David to escort you inside. Since this is not a request, Miss Weston, I expect you to follow my instructions without comment or delay."

Ironically, a part of her wanted to stick her tongue out at his bossiness, but she refrained and accepted David's helping hand. Mr. Peterson was domineering, for sure, but he was also looking out for her in a way that made her feel safe and secure. Cared for, even.

David followed her to her apartment door, while Mr. Peterson asked what she had in her refrigerator for dinner.

"I can heat up a frozen meal."

"Don't bother. I'll order something and have it delivered in fifteen minutes."

"You shouldn't waste your money, sir, I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Stop right there, Miss Weston, or you are going to get into trouble. I will decide what is best for you." She harrumphed. "Not allowed," he answered, but she sensed he was smiling again.

"You're a bossy boss," she teased with a half-smile as she handed David her keys.

"Oh, Miss Weston, you have no idea.

CHAPTER THREE

The moment they stepped into her apartment, Pam's phone rang. "Excuse me," she murmured to both David and her boss as she picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Give David back his cell. You won't need it any longer," Robert Peterson ordered.

With a shake of her head, Pam disconnected the other call and returned the security guard's device. "Thank you, David."

"Not a problem, Miss Weston," he replied, backing out of her entranceway. Her home phone was cordless, so she followed him and locked the door, as was her habit.

"Good girl," Peterson praised. "Now sit down and talk to me while we wait for your dinner to arrive."

She gave another harrumph, but obeyed.

"That's two, my dear. Keep it up and you're going to get a lesson in manners a lot quicker than I planned."

"What are you implying?"

"Never mind. We'll discuss everything tomorrow. I'm just warning you, I consider eye-rolling and harrumphing as forms of disrespect, for which I possess zero tolerance."

"You're right," she admitted, realizing she was being ungrateful after all he'd done for her. "I'm sorry. I'm being too familiar."

"No, Pam. That's not it. As we get to know each other better, I'll expect you to call me Rob when we're alone. So, it isn't the lack of formality I object to, it's the disrespect inherent in your actions. You're saying you'll do what I ask because I'm the boss, but since you don't agree with my reasons, you dismiss them as mere nonsense."

"So, I'm not allowed to disagree with you?"

"Okay, you're splitting hairs. Of course you may disagree with me, if you are so inclined, but I expect—no, I demand—you do so respectfully. Understand?"

"No, sir."

"You will. I intend to make all my expectations abundantly clear, so you'll recognize when you cross a line that will get you in trouble." The doorbell rang. "That will be your dinner. It's paid for, and the man has been tipped, so all you need to do is accept it. Put the phone down. I'll wait."

"Yes, sir," she murmured, careful to hold back her exasperation, though he no doubt sensed it anyway.

Opening the door, she recognized the logo of the five star restaurant at the other end of town and gasped at the number of bags the gentleman carried. Mr. Peterson had purchased enough food for an army.

"I was ordered to set this up for you, ma'am. Where would you like it?"

"The kitchen?" she suggested, directing the waiter to her small table where he unpacked and served up a meal that seemed more suitable for a romantic rendezvous than a nosh in a dinky blue and green eat-in kitchen. When he was finished serving, several containers went into her refrigerator, and he even shifted items around to make sure everything fit. Once the food was laid out and a bottle of chilled water poured into a glass with a slice of lemon, he bowed and departed. Following him, she bolted her door again.

Pam stared at the gourmet spread with her mouth open then recalled she'd left the CEO of

her company holding. Scurrying back to the living room, she picked up the phone she'd abandoned.

"Hello?"

"I'm here. So tell me what they sent."

"Since you ordered this massive banquet, I believe you already know the answer to your own question, sir."

He waited, saying nothing.

"Sorry," she mumbled, walking back to the kitchen. "I don't know why I'm getting so snippy with you. I'm not usually this rude with people."

"I'd say it's because you're feeling more secure with me, so I'm going to let it go for tonight. Just don't get into the habit. I will call you on it in the future."

"And what will you do?" she huffed. "Spank me?"

"Yes. Among other things."

"What?" Her feet stopped as if her shoes had been nailed to the floor.

"Calm down. Now," he insisted in a quiet, but firm tone. "I said we will discuss this tomorrow. If you're still suffering qualms over my intentions after we talk, I will find another place for you to work."

Tears instantly sprang to her eyes, and she swiped them back angrily. This wasn't at all what she'd expected. None of it. He was being far kinder than she deserved, but the thought of being physically disciplined, especially by him, made her stomach clench.

"You worry too much," he scolded. "Tell me what the restaurant sent."

She listed off the entrees and side dishes.

"What did they give you to drink?"

"Bottled water."

"Good, I'm pleased. I'll stay on the phone with you while you eat, if you want company."

He'd already wasted far too much time and money on her, so she needed to let him go. "No, I'm fine."

Silence.

"What?" she snapped, having realized by now that his silences indicated disapproval, which put her on the defensive.

"You're lying," he said simply. "Fair warning. Telling fibs will earn you a trip over my knee faster than anything else."

She sat down on one of her kitchen chairs and clapped a hand over her mouth. Every muscle in her body tensed as if in preparation for a physical battle. A total overreaction, but one she couldn't help.

Once she managed to quell her shaking, she whispered, "I'd best hang-up. My food is getting cold."

"Fine. Go ahead and eat. We'll talk tomorrow." She disconnected the call then fell to her knees and sobbed. She felt lost, afraid, confused, and overwhelmed as various emotions tumbled about her mind like sneakers in a dryer. At some point she stopped crying long enough to notice the firm pounding at the door, and she knew. My God, was the man psychic or what? He presided over two multi-billion dollar companies. What was he doing spending so much time with a loser like her?

After she pulled herself up, Pam grabbed a napkin to dry her tears and blow her nose. Then, she walked slowly to the door.

"I'm fine," she called out, refusing to let him in.

"Yes. I can hear that. Open the door, Pamela, or we will begin your lessons tonight."

His threat should have sent her scurrying to barricade her entrance, but this man had bought her dinner after he spent a half hour talking her down from a full-blown panic. So, despite the unease his words engendered, she drew back the bolt and opened her door.

Though he'd changed into jeans and a collared polo shirt, Pam still had difficulty accepting the fact her crisp, handsome, sexy, larger-than-life boss was standing in her dinky little apartment. Uncertain what to do next, Pam locked her door.

When she turned, he stood facing her with his arms crossed. His expression one of tired patience, he exhibited no anger or exasperation over her childish reaction, but she understood he was more than a little put out with her.

"Would you like some dinner?" she asked softly. "A nice man ordered far more food than I could ever possibly eat, so there's more than enough to share."

"Is there?"

"You're angry with me." It was a statement, not a question. Though he didn't show it, she'd disappointed him by pretending to be fine when she clearly wasn't. Why he should care, she couldn't imagine, but she suspected he'd be showing his disapproval with a firm hand on her rump if she agreed to his arrangement. The idea she even considered entering into such an agreement made her question her sanity, and if he'd made even the tiniest move toward her, she would have bolted. As it was, he merely stood with his legs akimbo and back straight, regarding her through intensely dark eyes that sparkled in the light.

"I'm not pleased with you at the moment. And, I would normally counter your pretense with a consequence, but I won't touch you until you agree to my conditions. Once you do, our arrangement will be mutual."

"What? I get to spank you, if you do something I disapprove of?"

The corner of his lip turned up slightly. "Brat."

"Bully."

When his smile broadened at her quip, Pam's breath caught in her throat. Why on earth was she pulling the tiger's tail? How could she even consider participating in some sort of dominant/subordinate relationship with this man?

Keeping his intense gaze fixed on her face, he bowed from the waist. "Thank you for the dinner invitation, Miss Weston. I shall be honored to accept."

His charm and teasing loosening a knot in her stomach, Pam did her best not to be embarrassed as she led the CEO of Peterson Enterprises into her small, inadequate kitchen. "There's not much room, I'm afraid, and this is way too much food."

He sat down in the chair she indicated and grinned up at her. "Since I wasn't sure what you liked, I decided to order a little bit of everything. Sample whatever appeals to you, and we'll save the rest or distribute it tomorrow."

After Pam handed Mr. Peterson a plate and a couple of slotted spoons, he served himself from the covered dishes laden with a variety of different meats, vegetables, and starches.

"This undoubtedly cost a fortune," she whispered, amazed once again by the quantity of food he'd ordered as she started to eat.

"Not your concern, Miss Weston," he murmured politely, before casting another blinding smile in her direction. "Trust me. I shall give you more than enough to worry about, so don't expend your energy fretting over something that's beyond your control."

"I hate waste," she admitted.

He gave her a small nod as his lean fingers expertly handled her cheap flatware to cut a

piece of sautéed chicken. "Oddly enough, so do I. What you can't eat, and prefer not to save for another night, I will order taken down to the homeless shelter. The food will not go to waste, I assure you."

She set her knife down on her plate and stared at him. "Why are you doing this? I'm a lost cause, Mr. Peterson. Haven't you figured that out, yet?"

"I believe I already mentioned my opinion on self-denigration, did I not?"

"I can't help it if it's true."

He met her gaze. "Fallacies only seem real if you give them credence, and I intend to prove your assumptions are incorrect."

"How?"

"Are you asking out of idle curiosity, or do you wish to begin our discussion tonight?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, it's more than idle curiosity, but I'm not sure I want to get into a detailed conversation regarding your proposal this evening."

"Your choice. For today."

"Are you saying after we talk my preferences won't matter?"

"Of course not." He popped a buttered carrot into his mouth. "But your choices will be greatly reduced once we have an agreement."

After taking another bite of her beef stroganoff, she asked, "Will I need to sign something?"

"Only if you prefer it. This is between you and me. Obviously, Krista knows, but, if anything, she will be protective of you. She won't say or do anything to harm either of our reputations."

Pam suspected he was right. So, she had her rich, executive boss sitting in her kitchen telling her if she didn't follow his rules, he'd spank her. Even her mother hadn't spanked her. Her stepfather.... He didn't spank, he whipped.

Still, that raised another question in her mind, so she took a deep breath and charged ahead.

"Will you expect me to sleep with you?"

He cleared his throat as though something had lodged in it then took a sip of water. "If you're asking whether I will expect you to spread your legs or any other part of your anatomy for me as a condition of your employment, the answer is no. If you're asking whether I would like you in my bed at some time, I would have to say yes. However, not as a condition for your employment."

"But the other would be 'a condition of my employment'? The spanking part?"

"Yes. I fear that piece is non-negotiable. Disobey me, defy me, disrespect me or yourself, and I will punish you for it."

"How?"

He regarded her carefully. "I tend to let the punishment fit the crime, and I'm very creative, though my preference will be to take you over my knee. Should I feel stronger action is required, I may order you to bend over my desk."

A chill containing a mix of terror and another emotion she couldn't quite define ran the length of Pam's spine. "In the office, sir?"

"Yes."

"Won't everyone hear me? What if I scream and cry?"

"I expect you'll cry, but I sincerely doubt you'll scream. My intent is to correct undesirable behavior, Miss Weston, not draw blood, bruise, or wound you in any way."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Yes, actually, it does. No one will hear you even if you should throw a tantrum, which you

most likely will at some point, and I will respond with equal firmness. Temper tantrums have no place in the office, so they will not be tolerated. I can prove that tomorrow also, if you like."

She lowered her eyes. "I'm not sure I can do this."

"You can. The question is whether or not you're willing to trust me."

"What does trust have to do with this?"

"Everything. Trust between us is essential if this is to work. Without it, we are both doomed to fail."

Pam laid her fork beside her knife then glanced at the kitchen clock and gasped. It was ten to midnight. She'd had no idea it was so late.

"Thank you for dinner," she murmured softly.

He smiled. "You're welcome."

"I'm feeling a bit drained at the moment."

"Yes, I imagine you are. Why don't you get ready for bed while I wash the dishes?"

"No! I can't let you do that. I'll clean up."

"All right. It is your home, so I won't insist, but I will help."

"No, it's—"

"Pam? Do you seriously want to waste time arguing with me? Has nothing I've said this evening convinced you I will persist until I get my way?"

Grinning despite her unease, she admitted, "Actually, everything you did tonight has exhibited that trait."

"Then why argue?"

She shrugged. Yup, having the CEO and her boss cleaning up her kitchen with her was not the way she'd expected to end this day. They worked side by side, with little conversation, which was refreshing as well as a little eerie. It was as if they'd been doing this for years.

When the dishes were washed, dried, and put away, he said, "Bring the food you don't want to the office tomorrow, and I'll make sure it's properly distributed."

"It's going to be difficult carrying all this on the bus."

"Ah, yes. Glad you mentioned that. I'm sending my driver, Paul, to pick you up at seven thirty. That should give you enough time to finish the Hemley file so you won't be upset or distracted by an unfinished assignment while we—chat."

Being driven to work in his limo would only cause unwanted gossip. She shook her head. "No, I can—"

"Miss Weston, I am this close"—he held his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart—"to turning you over my knee tonight, despite your lack of agreement. So, I suggest you not press me further."

She swallowed, but knew she was ill-equipped to win the argument. "I don't know what to say."

"A simple thank you would be a refreshing change."

"I thanked you for dinner," she objected.

"Yes, you did, but that's not what I meant. Rather than argue or provide me with a list of reasons why I shouldn't send a car for you, I'd like you to say, 'thank you, sir.'"

Dipping into a mock curtsy, she murmured, "Thank you, sir."

Then he stepped closer, and her breath escaped her in a rush. "Relax, kitten. I'm only going to give you a friendly kiss good night. Very impersonal, I assure you."

Pam doubted anything about this man would be impersonal, and even if he viewed his kiss as a friendly gesture, she feared it would awaken desires within her that weren't entirely

appropriate for their relationship, or the workplace, either.

"You worry too much," he scolded, bending forward to mold his lips to hers. Releasing a groan, Pam pressed fully against him and gave herself over to his gentle persuasion.

Though he only deepened the kiss a bit, it was enough to make Pam clutch his shoulders as if he could anchor all her turbulent emotions. Her body tingled with tiny shivers as she grew increasingly lightheaded. This man was more than a contradiction, he was an oxymoron personified. Then, he released her mouth and held her while she trembled in his arms.

"You're safe, kitten. I promise, as long as you remain with me, no harm will come to you. I will protect and care for you, as I believe my actions demonstrated tonight."

"Will every night be like this?"

"Yes. Every night you need to be like this, will be exactly like this."

She drew back. "I still don't understand why you're here. Or why you insisted upon the limo, the dinner, the reassurance. Why me?"

He lightly ran his thumb across her lower lip. "You harbor doubts I don't possess. You will come to fully comprehend my reasons, in time, and, by then, I hope you will see yourself as I do."

She lowered her arms. "None of this makes any sense, but I do trust you."

"That is all I ask for now." He bent to give her another light kiss. "Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

Before she could reply, he slipped out the door. Pam sighed, fingering her lips where he'd caressed them. Kissed them.

"Lock the door, Miss Weston," he ordered brusquely.

With a grin and a shake of her head, she obeyed. Then, after the sound of his steps trailed down the hall, she got ready for bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.