

The Temp

Chapter one

London, England, the World

PAs: have you ever thought about what might happen while you're soaking up the sun in Ibiza? Have you thought about that interloper who will be sitting in your seat, answering the phone, dealing with the mail, transcribing the letters, organising the diary, taking minutes, chasing up the corporate caterers, doing all those little chores that make you indispensable? No? Well, you should. No-one's job is safe these days, and the last thing you want is to come back and find that everyone liked The Temp better than they like you. Don't let it happen. There are steps you can take to make sure it doesn't. All permanent secretaries should have a holiday checklist, and, in case you're unfamiliar with standard procedure, it should read something like this:

- Six weeks before leaving: book resort. Show everyone the brochure, swimming-pool, descriptions of night-life etc. Go on diet to fit into puce polka-dot bikini bought in winter sales. Be seen eating Pret-a-Manger take-away salads and fat-free yoghurt at desk. Book sessions on a sunbed.
- Month before leaving: start heaving worried sighs about how the office will function without you. Fill time making lists on Post-it notes and racing up and down the back stairs with wedges of paper in your hand. Tell anyone who tries to get you to type anything that you don't have time as you have to get ahead enough to get away. Write big sign saying "BOOK TEMP!!!", doodle flowers all over it and Sellotape it to your telephone.
- Two weeks before leaving: reorganise the filing system, so that no-one can find anything without your help. File-by-date is a good one, because only you will remember when something came in. Failing that, try something like file-by-colour or file-by-nickname. Talk about how grateful you will be to get a rest.
- Three days before departure: ring round the agencies. It's best if you can manage to do this on a Friday afternoon, so that the incoming secretary isn't informed of her assignment until Monday morning but, failing that, as long as you give your own name as the contact and a

start time of two hours after the office opens, you will have made sure she gets off to a rocky start. If you have any special skills like shorthand, neglect to inform the agency, but if you work in a formal, power-dressing office, make sure to tell them that the dress code is casual.

- Day before departure: tidy your desk. Leave framed photo of boyfriend, cuddly toy and personal coffee mug (unwashed) out to mark your territory, and lock all stationery, pens, petty cash and directions about standard correspondence layout into lower desk drawers. Do not hide the key under the begonia by the telephone, as that is the first place she'll look. Most important: take the following and hide them in a filing cabinet on the other side of the office or, even better, on a completely different floor: internal telephone list, telephone and computer instructions, boss's diary. Get bikini-wax in lunch-hour. If boss has computerised diary, password-protect it and keep your password secret. If you can also manage to lock away the telephone and the audio-typing equipment, all the better. If possible, inform your colleagues that you're not sure if The Temp speaks English as a first language. Tell colleagues that The Temp is called Tracie unless, of course, her name actually is Tracie. This is a brilliant move, as they will spend the first week wondering why she never reacts when they speak to her, and be convinced of her low IQ. Spend two hours writing a note explaining where the coffee-making facilities are, but if there is a daily essential such as collecting faxes from another part of the building and filing them for urgent attention, keep it quiet. Never, ever leave directions to the loo.
- Day of departure: remember to pack sun-cream. Phone from airport saying, "has The Temp arrived yet?" an hour before you told her to come in. Relax in the knowledge that, while you're sucking on a pina colada, some woman you have never met has just walked into hell. And found that her name is Tracie.