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Chapter 1

It's Not Us, It's You

Then—June

I blame the points committee.

For those who don't live under the tyranny of yearly evaluations of your productivity and ability to bring in clients being plugged into a mysterious formula that spits out the number of "points" (i.e. money), that you'll receive each year, perhaps it seems silly to care. But when you've worked sixty-hour weeks since you were twenty-six—scratch that, your whole adult life—and you've made it, but you still haven't made it far enough, it's humiliating. Being a partner isn't good enough. Being in every "best of" lawyer publication doesn't cut it. Putting yourself out there in a million ways that make you uncomfortable doesn't mean shit. If you didn't bring in the clients and/or the billable hours, your points are cut. Doesn't matter that you helped build the place. Those years of two thousand plus billable hours and no time to yourself—well, thanks, I guess, but what does that have to do with today?

Nothing.

Your points are being cut, you're taking a step down, you're now in the loser tier, and if you don't course correct, you're going to reverse lap the new partners in the most pathetic race ever.

Not that they said that exactly, but the sad turn of my mentor Thomas's mouth when he walked into my office and shut the door to deliver the news said it all.

Without some radical intervention, my days were numbered.

When Thomas left without giving me any advice on what to do other than to say that we'd "just have to wait and see" if my profile turned into files, I sat at my desk and stared at my

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computer screen as if it might deliver answers. What had gone wrong? Sure, the last year had been less busy, but that was because one of my main clients had gone bankrupt. It wasn't my fault—I wasn't their financial adviser. They were the kind of client you didn't replace in ten seconds, or in ten months. But that hadn't been taken into account.

I'd done everything I was asked to do and more, and it hadn't been enough.

What was I supposed to do now?

I needed to get out of my head, so I called Dan.

“Should I be putting pink Champagne on ice?” he asked as a greeting, the answer assumed, his anticipation of our celebration palpable.

I felt the sudden need to cry. Dan had sung those words, like he often did, with the confidence of certainty. In thirty-nine years, Nicole Mueller had never failed, so I had to be calling with good news.

I turned my back to the glass door to my office so no one could see when the tears fell.

“Um, no, decidedly not.”

“Wait, what?”

I could imagine Dan, sitting in his own office in Jersey City. He was in-house counsel at a bank, changing paths five years ago when he didn't make partner. I'd supported his choice. We didn't both need to be working this hard, particularly if his firm wasn't going to recognize his worth. The bank paid well and let Dan have his weekends. It was an easy decision.

“They put me in the Samuel tier,” I said, naming a partner who was one point away from being kicked out.

“The loser tier? No, you're shitting me.”

“I wish I was.”

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I stared hard at my computer screen, blinking back tears. It was open to Facebook, a place I went when I needed to distract myself for a minute or ten with pictures of cute puppies and smart-alecky kids.

“Why?”

“My hours were down.”

“But AlCore went bankrupt.”

“I know.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“I said that.”

“They didn’t give you any warning?”

I thought back to the meeting I’d had with the points committee in May. Everything was positive. In January, I’d been named as one of the top 40 lawyers under 40 and had been featured in a prominent lawyers’ magazine because of it. I’d made a bunch of other lists too; the clients loved me, my hours were down, but they were sure that was a blip. I was a model for others to follow, they’d implied—maybe even said—as Thomas nodded along like a proud parent. I’d left the meeting confident.

Getting their decision today felt like being in front of a judge who’s made up her mind but doesn’t tell you what she’s going to do so you have no way of convincing her otherwise. “No, there was no warning. Thomas seemed so ... guilty.”

Dan growled. “Fuck Thomas.”

“Yeah.”

“Seriously, Nic. You should leave.”

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I stared at my hands. My nails were chipped and ragged. Was I not polished enough? Was that why? I've never been big on personal grooming. That sounds bad. I'm a clean person, I dress well, and my shoulder-length chestnut hair is well-kept, but that extra primping that a lot of professional women seem to find the time for? I've never had the patience for it.

"And go where?"

"Lots of firms would be happy to take you."

I turned away from Facebook, facing my windowsill. It was cluttered with the plaques they encouraged you to buy when you made all those lists. Best Lawyers, Chambers, Who's Who. I was in all of them. Future star. Litigation star. Consistently recommended. I was supposed to make full equity partner this year—that was the plan. Instead, I was moving away from that goal.

"Not now. I should've taken Fosters up on their offer last year."

"What's changed?"

"Me. In the eyes of the legal world."

"You don't have to tell them about the points."

I smiled sadly at my own reflection. My dark blue eyes were tired, and my hair was pulled back too tightly from my face, making me seem severe. I looked like a loser, despite Dan's optimism. It was one of the things I loved most about him—how naïve he still was, his Ohio earnestness firmly in place despite more than fifteen years in this city. It was why he didn't make partner. His firm didn't think he had a killer's instinct, and they were right.

"They probably already know."

"How?"

"Because people don't sit on this kind of information." My email dinged, dragging my eyes back to my screen. "Goddamn it."

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“What?”

“I just got an email from Albert & Prince.”

“The recruiters?”

“The recruiters for mid-level law firms, yes.”

“It’s a coincidence,” Dan said, but he didn’t sound like he meant it. Dan might be naïve, but he’s not stupid.

“It’s been five minutes since I got the news and they already think I’m vulnerable enough to move my practice to a firm I didn’t even interview at.”

“Maybe they’d respect you more there? Big fish in a small pond and all that.”

“Maybe.”

“So?”

“I wouldn’t be able to respect myself.”

I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but it was true. I don’t know when I turned into a law firm snob, but I was. It wasn’t that those mid-level firms didn’t do good work; they did. Lots of smart people I’d gone to law school with had ended up at that level. But it wasn’t where you *chose* to be. It was where you washed ashore. Until now, I’d only had choices, not inevitabilities. But Dan had been at one of those firms, and he hadn’t even made partner—

God I was awful, even in my own head.

“Sorry, I know how that sounds.”

“It’s okay,” Dan said lightly.

I forgot sometimes, because his ego was so firmly in check, that he still had one. Bad enough that his wife was the star in the family. I didn’t need to rub it in.

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“No, it’s not. How about this. Why don’t you put that Champagne on ice after all and I’ll leave early, and we’ll order from Kam Fung?”

“I thought you had to work.”

“I did but fuck it. Fuck them.”

“That’s my girl.”

I smiled. “I’ll see you at six, okay?”

“You betcha. Keep your chin up.”

“I always do.”

We hung up and I kept staring out the window. Midtown lay below—all that buzzing ambition, the striving, the aggressiveness. I’d loved it from the first time I’d visited for interviews in my second year of law school. I was top of my class at Yale, and despite the fact that I had zero contacts in the city or the legal world, everyone wanted me. Taking me to dinners I couldn’t afford and providing me with hard-to-get theatre tickets. What was not to love?

My computer pinged again. A Facebook notification. I’d tried a thousand times to turn the stupid things off, but I’d never managed it. I didn’t ask the IT department to do it, because those guys were spies who were only too happy to report infractions to the managing partner.

Guess who’s having a baby! My high school friend, Tammy, had written.

Oh, God, another one? Ever since I turned thirty-nine, I noticed a peculiar phenomenon among my high school girlfriends who’d remained childfree until then—they were all getting pregnant for the first time. The Last-Minute Babies, I called them. Getting one in before they were forty. Dan and I had decided not to have kids, but it wasn’t something you advertised, not unless you wanted to get interrogated about why, and told how babies were so wonderful and

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enriching and who was going to take care of us when we were old? And then everyone just assumed it was because you were too focused on your career.

As if that were a bad thing.

Dan never had to answer these questions.

If men ever wondered why women were angry all the time, they could start there.

Congratulations! I wrote, then turned back to my inbox. Fifty new emails had accumulated in the hour I'd lost to the points committee bomb dropping. I scanned through them quickly. Three recruiters had already reached out, and several of my partners had written short, *sorry!* Or *That's crazy* emails. No other content. No mention of points. Plausible deniability that they were criticizing management. Billings took a 75% drop on points day. Usually that pissed me off, which showed my lack of empathy. I probably had some apologies of my own to dole out. I certainly didn't care about billing today. Instead, I decided to clean up my emails, then leave, even though it was the middle of the afternoon.

I spent an hour deleting and triaging emails, so I could exit without a black cloud of guilt. When my inbox was finally under control, I stood and raised my hands above my head.

Another email pinged into my inbox. *Please join us*, read the subject line.

God, another drinks thing. I was already losing one to two nights a week going to networking events. But if I was going to turn this situation around, I couldn't turn invitations down.

I opened it and sat back down as I read.

Dear Nicole,

Have you ever wondered why your career hasn't progressed as far as it should?

Why others have continued to climb the corporate ladder while you've been stuck in place?

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We've been there.

Despite years of hard work and all the talent in the world, our careers were stalled too.

Why?

Because the boy's club still exists. No one wants to talk about it, but it's true.

So, we decided to do something about it, and that's how Panthera Leo was born. Women helping women succeed the way men have for centuries. Over the past twenty years we've become a network of CEOs, managing partners, executives, and money managers—every successful woman you know is probably one of us.

And that's why we're writing to you. You've been recommended by one of us, and we'd be delighted if you'd become a member. All it takes is a few minutes of your time to complete our application, which can be found at www.pantheraleo.com.

A few minutes, and everything you always wanted could be yours.

Our next experience is happening soon. Please join us.

Best,

Karma & Michelle