

One.

Jessica, 43, full of optimism.

I left the house this morning determined to take the day by the horns and throw it over my shoulder like a scarf, if necessary. I'd had two cups of coffee, I'd remembered to floss, and I was going to tell my boss the crap with Valentina simply wasn't going to fly any more.

Forty minutes later, because this is Los Angeles and it takes forty minutes to go anywhere, at any time, I walk into the office slightly less full of beans and with *Tik Tok* by Kesha stuck in my head. I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that, but it was the last thing playing when I turned off the car, so that's how that happened. *The party don't start till I walk in...* If only I had half her confidence.

I could hear John before I could see him, which was par for the course. Classic iron hand in the velvet glove, my boss, and if occasionally the gloves are fingerless and the fingers a little bit stabby, so much the better. Southern to the core, with all the civility and elegance that implies, but with a Yankee carpetbagger's eye for profitable misery. Our law firm doesn't openly chase ambulances, but John does love a tearful plaintiff. He can smell saltwater before it steps off the elevator.

I spotted his head over a carpeted cubicle wall. It was angled in such a way I knew he was with a client. Maybe even a potential client; there was an especially unguent quality to the way his hair fell over his forehead, his eyes hooded with concern. He's handsome, in the way any large predator is handsome – best appreciated from a safe distance. Up close the extra rows of teeth tend to be a distraction.

As if feeling my disapproval, John looked up and spotted me.

“Ah, Jessica!” he said, as if his whole pitch had been waiting for this moment. “You must meet our newest client.”

As there were nearly half a dozen legal assistants in cubicles between the two of us, we both charted an intersecting course and met up – as if by magic – by the impressive double doors to the office suite.

“Mrs. Falconer, this is Jessica Burnstein, a Partner and one of our most brilliant attorneys.”

The woman, who was older than I had suspected from John’s level of intensity, gazed tremulously up at me. “Will she be on my case?”

“No,” said John firmly. “I will be handling your case myself.”

Older *and* richer, then.

The lady and I shook hands and I applied the carefully calibrated smile lawyers use when they’re meeting someone who has probably been wronged in some way, but whose opportunity for vengeance/justice has arrived. The smile says *you’re fine now, but I’m sorry for your loss/accident/partial dismemberment/inability to compete internationally in your chosen sport*. After nearly twenty years of practice, it comes pretty easily.

John ushered Mrs. Falconer to the elevators, and I headed to my office. As I passed Laurel, my assistant, I told her to ask Valentina to come and see me.

Valentina was younger than me, hungrier than me, and after my job. I was her mentor, so that was fine with me. It had been eight or nine years since I’d taken her under my wing; she was

ready to leave the nest, and I was ready to make room. However, John was using Valentina's future as a stick to prod me with, and I was tired of it.

Valentina came in and shut the door behind her. She slinked – there is no other word, unless it's slunk – across the carpet and flowed into a chair. It's not her fault she's a partial liquid, she was born that way. Natural beauty is no more of an achievement than deformity is a punishment – it just is. One of the many reasons I liked Valentina was she knew it. She was incredibly smart, and one of the hardest working lawyers I'd ever met. In a business where appearance contributes to success, she made sure the first impression of beauty was quickly overwhelmed by the second and more lasting impression of competence. Beauty always fades, but it lasts so much longer if you lay a thick layer of intelligence and integrity underneath it.

“Good morning, Jess,” said Valentina, “How goes it?”

“It goes,” I replied, evenly. “I have a feeling John is going to talk to me today about making you a partner.”

“Excellent.”

“Yes, except I think he's going to be a sneaky bugger about it.”

Her delicately arched eyebrows rose a little. “In what way?”

I shrugged. “In some way I haven't anticipated yet, because he likes to keep me on my toes. Has he said anything to you?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Not a word.”

I looked at her. Was it possible she was lying? A momentary flicker of doubt... but she saw it in my eyes and leaned forward.

“Jessica, he’s not the only one with a plan, remember? Don’t underestimate me. I want to make Partner, and I want you to be head of litigation, so I can slipstream you all the way to the Supreme Court.” She sat back. “Jessica, a wise woman once pointed out to me that men have dominated the legal profession for decades and used their collective power to improve things for other men, both inside and outside of the law. It’s our turn now.”

“Who told you that? Me?”

“No, my grandmother.”

“The one that’s a judge?”

“No, the one that’s a hairdresser.”

“Right.” I paused. “So... you’re ready?”

“I’m ready, and so are you. Go on your trip and don’t let him ruin it by coming along inside your head.”

“That’s a horrible thought.”

She stood up, again appearing to defy the laws of physics. “You’re welcome.” She turned and walked to the door, pausing once more. “Plus, if you can handle a 16-year-old girl, you can handle a fifty-five-year-old guy.”

“You would think.”

She left, and I swung my chair around and gazed out of the window. Across the canyons of downtown Los Angeles was a skyscraper that featured a glass side on the outside of the 70th floor. My daughter Emily and I had gone down it once, and I’d been much less scared than I’d expected. The thought of the lawsuit that would arise from dropping a tourist a thousand feet onto a busy stretch of downtown LA told me they’d probably made the slide strong enough to

drive a truck down. Emily had stopped halfway down the slide to examine the construction and Instagram pictures, and afterwards we'd had one of the few conversations in recent memory that hadn't devolved into an argument about her future. I thought about the trip and wondered if we could work something life-threatening into the itinerary every day, in order to maintain the peace.

Laurel buzzed me. "Jessica, John wants to see you in his office when you have a minute."

"Alright, let him know I'm on my way."

But I waited ten minutes, because, you know, power move.

John was sharpening his scythe as I came in, wait, did I say scythe? I meant pencil.

"Ah, Jessica."

I wondered if he always said Ah before he said my name, and I'd somehow failed to notice it. Maybe he thought my name was Ahjessica?

"John," I replied, proving that we were at least each talking to the right person. I started to sit down, whereupon he told me to take a seat, as if I'd been waiting for permission. That b.s. might work on a junior lawyer, but I'd been at this game too long.

"Already taken, thanks," I said. "How can I help you?" By phrasing it that way I put him on the back foot, because he'd actually requested my presence, not my help. Pay attention, folks, it's a master class in here.

"You can't," he laughed, which is why he's the boss. "But I wanted to talk to you about Valentina."

I nodded and waited.

He leaned forward. “Look, you and I are similar people. We know how things work, right?”

Forced teaming. Google it. It’s what manipulators do to make you feel a connection they can then exploit. I’ve read *The Gift of Fear*, (which everyone should) so I say, “I don’t think we’re all that similar, John, and you wanted to talk about Valentina?”

Side bar: I actually like John. I followed him from a previous firm a decade earlier, and I trust him because I know how he lies. He’s an incredible lawyer, who thinks better on his feet than most people do sitting down and trying really hard, and he’s taught me everything I know. But I also know how he operates.

John smiled. “I like Valentina, she’s extremely capable.”

“Yes.”

He regarded me narrowly for a moment, then relaxed his face. It’s his way of miming “*I’m not sure I understand you... wait, now I get it because, damn, I’m smart.*” He must practice in a mirror. “I know you think she should make partner this year.”

“I thought she should have made partner last year.” My face betrays nothing, which I’m long past practicing in a mirror.

“But there is the issue of the Board.”

My breathing was steady. “In what sense?”

“Well, you know...”

“No, I don’t.”

“The Board wouldn’t want it to look like we were, you know, reacting to current events.”

“Which current events, John? Please speak plainly.” (Again, side note: When buying time, phrase your delaying tactics as mild criticism – *I’m sorry, that didn’t make sense/Please restate that, it wasn’t clear/Your language is garbled, please remove that scorpion from your mouth*. It makes your conversational opponent scramble a little. Side side note: If your questioner has a scorpion in her mouth, deal with that first.)

He appeared to be mildly uncomfortable, which was one of his tells. John has never been mildly uncomfortable in his life; he was about to lay on a thick layer of BS.

“Well, the me-too thing, the harassment thing...”

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to continue.

“The Board is concerned if we promote too many women at once it will look like we’re reacting to social pressure.”

“Social pressure to promote capable people?”

“Women.”

“Which other women are up for partnership?”

“Janet Manolo. Just Janet.”

I took a breath. “And the board thinks making two women partner in one year is too many? Last year you made three men partners and no one wondered about that.” I suddenly thought of the RBG quote about enough women on the supreme court being nine.

He capped and uncapped a pen. “Well, there was the thing with Jackson...”

Jackson was a dirty word around the office. He was a partner who’d been fired earlier that year, much to the amusement of every other lawyer in Los Angeles, most of whom had hated him for years. I frowned at him and angled my head slightly. “The ‘thing’ being the way he

offered an assistant a gram of coke to show him her breasts? Are we calling that ‘a thing’ now? It was illegal, it was repulsive, and it was why he got fired and sued in civil court. What on earth does Jackson’s inability to do his job have anything to do with Valentina’s brilliance at hers?”

“It’s not me, Jessica, it’s the Board. They’re worried about how it looks.”

I frowned and bounced my foot. “John, you’re forgetting who you’re talking to. Please spell out what you mean, because I’m going out of town in two days and I don’t have time to parse and reparse what you’re saying looking for clues.”

John pretended to consider whether to speak plainly or not, when obviously he’d been working up to this moment the whole time. He’d manipulated me into asking him to do it, so he could make me responsible. I think I’m pretty good at directing testimony, but John really is a master.

He turned up his palms. “Look, if you really want me to spell it out...”

I said nothing. Fool me once.

John hesitated, which he only ever does on purpose. “Valentina is a woman. She’s...” again, pretending to be uncomfortable, “A very attractive women. The board is concerned if we promote her to partner this year, this soon after the Jackson thing...”

I uncrossed my legs and leaned forward. “Stop calling it ‘a thing’, John, like it was an adorable eccentricity. He didn’t wear cowboy hats in the office or collect Disney miniatures. He broke several laws, State and Federal, traumatized another human being, and cost the firm millions of dollars and untold reputation points.”

“Precisely. The Board is worried if we make Valentina a partner this year people will think it’s payback for Jackson. That he did something to her, and we’re making her a partner to keep her quiet.”

I considered this for a moment. It was perfect in its evil, sexist subtlety.

“Let me see if I understand you, John.”

He raised his eyebrows at me and for a split second I saw that he was actually unsure what I was going to say. He doesn’t like to be in that position. I put him out of his misery.

“You’re saying that a brilliant lawyer, a woman who has worked for the firm for over a decade, brought in major clients and extensive revenue, who regularly speaks on international panels and authors articles in journals, in two languages...”

“I know Valentina is qualified, Jessica.”

I raised my hand, “You’re saying this person cannot be promoted as she deserves because another lawyer – a male lawyer – behaved like a total pig.”

“Well, people might assume...”

“That she only got promoted because she had dirt on Jackson? The implication being that he assaulted her too, but rather than cold-cock him into next week and have him arrested, she would use it to further her own career?”

For the first time in my experience, John genuinely looked uncomfortable.

“You know how people talk, Jessica.”

I shook my head. “No, John, I know how male lawyers talk, and how they assume other people think. Valentina deserves to make Partner because of her work. That should be the only

criteria, John, and would be the only criteria if she were a man.” I was steamed. “Let me be very clear. If you don’t promote Valentina – and Janet, who also deserves it – I will resign in protest.”

John looked at me calmly, and I suddenly wondered if he’d wanted to force me into this position all along. “If you do that people will think it’s because of Jackson, too.”

I took a breath. “John, not everyone looks at the actions of women and assumes that somewhere a man is responsible for them. That’s you.”

He sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “My hands are tied on this one, Jess. The Board...”

“That’s bullshit, John.” I pointed at him, “and you know it.”

“I promise I’ll make them Partners next year. We’re pretty Partner-heavy right now anyway.”

I looked at him. “So you won’t be making any Partners this year, then?”

Long pause.

“Well, no, we’ll be making Johnson and Everly partners. They’re excellent lawyers.”

“And have penises.”

“Irrelevant.”

“How are their penises irrelevant but Valentina and Janet’s ovaries a total deal breaker?”

My voice trembled, and I suddenly felt myself wanting to cry with anger, which is so not my favorite feeling. I’d love to become enraged without getting emotional, but that’s just not how I work. If I’m not emotional, I don’t lose my temper. You see the problem? Unfortunately, as I said earlier, John can smell saltwater a mile away.

He got up and came around the desk. “Jess, don’t get all upset.” He patted me on the shoulder, as if I was a horse. A short horse sitting in a chair, but it was that kind of reassuring touch he was going for.

“I’m not upset, John, I’m furious.”

“Well, you look upset.” He got up to go back to his chair, “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? We’ll be telling Valentina and Janet the news later, and I know it would be hard for you to be here.”

I swear to you I felt my tears getting sucked back into my tear ducts. “You’re telling them last thing on a Friday? That’s kind of a dick move.”

He shrugged. “It’s just business, Jess.”

“No, John, it’s blatant sexism and total bullshit.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion.”

I stood up. “It’s more than an opinion, it’s the truth. You had Jackson working here for months after rumors started, and it was only when there were male witnesses that you started paying attention. Now you’re literally not promoting someone because of their gender, *which is illegal.*” I could feel my heart pounding.

John laughed, “What, you’re going to sue me now? You’re a partner too, Jessica, you have a responsibility to the firm. And to yourself – your share of the corporate profits this year will pay for several years of college.” He smiled at me, and said, “Aren’t you going on a college tour with Emma next week? Just wait till those tuition bills start rolling in, you’ll soon stop worrying about anyone else’s salary.”

I stared at him, and while I hate to use a cliché, the blood was literally rushing in my ears. Tears were pricking my eyes again – traitors – but I knew what I wanted to say.

“John, it’s not about salary. It’s about equity.”

“Jessica, their time will come. I promise.”

“Their time is now, John, or I walk.”

He shook his head at me, “Don’t be silly, Jessica. Don’t let your emotions get the better of you, you’re too good for that.”

“Are you going to make them Partners?”

“No.”

“Then I quit.” I turned and walked to the door.

“Jessica, don’t be so childish.”

I paused and turned on my heel like a boss, “Why don’t you go and say that to the Board, John, then give me a call. I’m out next week, as you say, and I won’t announce my resignation until the week after that. Fix it, John.”

I opened the door. “And by the way, my daughter’s name is Emily, not Emma.” I walked out, closing the door behind me.

Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck. Now what was I going to do?