INTRODUCTION

You’re a woman of color who wants to succeed in the practice of law. If that’s what you want, then I believe that you can achieve it.

How can I say that without having met you?

You’ve already got a history of achievement. Look at what you’ve accomplished so far on your checklist.

**Checklist**

- Take the LSAT
- Apply to law school
- Interview for summer clerkship(s)
- Do excellent work during your clerkship(s)
- Graduate from law school
- Pass the bar exam (OK you may not have accomplished this one just yet. But I know you will work very hard to achieve this goal too.)
- And now you’ve got the coveted Big Firm offer in hand.

Congratulations! You should be very proud.

I don’t use those words lightly. **You should be very proud.** Stop here just a minute and take them in. Soak it up. These are tremendous accomplishments.

I know you overachievers. You’re never satisfied. You’re always looking off in the distance at whatever spectacular new goals you’ve set for yourself. That’s no way to live.

There will always be new goals, as there should be. But it’s also really important to take stock of what you’ve done so far; otherwise life passes you by. I remember when I graduated from law school. It has been over a decade, but I remember feeling that day as if my heart would burst, I was so proud of myself. You deserve to feel the same.

Feeling it? OK, good, let’s move on.

Now you’re ready to take on your latest goal. It’s the biggest one of your career and life yet: making partner at the Big Firm. It’s an exciting and scary challenge. Can you do it?

You look around you at the firm and maybe you don’t see that many faces of color. At least not that many at the top. You wonder what that means for you.

It’s a good question.

**Where Do We Stand?**

Part One of this book is an intriguing combination of the past and the present.
In Chapter One, we look at the history of women of color in the law. These pioneers did not have it easy but they managed to accomplish some amazing things.

In Chapter Two, we look at the state of affairs for women of color practicing law today. The findings are startling. As Chapter One demonstrates, we have made a lot of progress in the U.S.A. when it comes to race relations, and yet . . . as Chapter Two illustrates, we still have a long way to go.

Nowhere is this predicament more evident than in the practice of law, especially the practice of Big Firm law. That’s the focus of this book. It’s about what it takes to achieve greatness as a woman of color in the practice of law at a large firm.

Sure, this book will still be incredibly helpful if you choose to practice in other arenas, whether it’s a mid-sized firm or boutique, government, in-house, public interest and so on.

But the focus is Big Firm life. It’s the “Holy Grail” of the practice of law for women of color.

Note: If you decide to leave Big Firm life or even the law altogether for the proverbial greener pastures, there’s a big, fat chapter for that too. Not all of us are going to stay. Not all of us should stay. Your destiny may be elsewhere.

Who Cares about History? I Need to Know What Works Today!

So why do we have to get into this “moldy old-y” ancient history anyway? Because it’s not so long ago actually. And some of it is taking place right now. But most importantly, and as you’ve no doubt heard many times before, you have to know where you’ve been to know where you’re going. In order to move forward with confidence and capability and to hit your target, you need to know your history.

But don’t despair. I promise that the focus of this book isn’t how hard it is for women of color in the law. How not encouraging would that be? This book focuses on strategy. I talked to several women of color attorneys who have scaled the heights at their firms, so that we could uncover the strategies that will help you achieve your goals at the firm.

Who Is This Book for?

New and Junior Associates. This book has been written especially for young women of color associates. If you’re just starting your career at the firm or you’ve only been there for a year or two, this book is for you.

Mid-Level and Senior Associates. Maybe you’ve actually been practicing for a while but it sure would be nice to know that others have ex-
experienced the joys and agonies you’ve felt (and perhaps continue to feel). Pull up a chair and put your feet up; you’ll enjoy this book. Or maybe you’ve gotten a bit off track and you’re not doing as well as you’d hoped. You can use the book as a compass to get back on track.

Pre-Law and Law Students. If you’re a hard-working woman of color who is a pre-law student, law school student, or perhaps you’re contemplating a second career in the law, this book is for you too. As you’ll see from the stories that partners share, the earlier you can begin to create a positive impression about yourself, the better off you’ll be.

Law Firms. This book is also for you if you’re curious about what it’s like to be a woman of color at a firm, and you’re looking for strategies as to how to attract, retain, mentor, and cultivate women of color. It’s a terrific resource for understanding how some women of color experience practicing law. I emphasize “some” because it would be easy to read what’s here and generalize about women of color as a whole. I’d be cautious about doing that since every person has her own unique perspective. I would view the book as a terrific starting point from which to inquire as you talk to individual women of color attorneys.

How to Read this Book
There are a couple of different ways to approach it. I tend to read books from front to back as quickly as possible, and then I read them again to take notes. You can do that. Or you can treat it like the handbook it’s meant to be. Flip through the Table of Contents and find the chapter that corresponds to what you want to know right now. (My recommendation is not to skip over Part One, however. Or at least make sure to read it at some point. Remember what I said about knowing your history.)

That’s why I say start where you like. Pick and choose. The book will be here when you need help. When you’re done reading it, put it up on your shelf at work and pull it down when you need it. Highlight passages that interest you, use those yellow arrow tabs firms are so fond of to mark a few sections, write some notes in the margins. It’s your book.

Most importantly, think of this book as words of wisdom from your big sister. Imagine what it would be like if you had a big sister who was a partner at a Big Firm. Well, now you do!

The women I interviewed for this book care deeply for you. They want very badly for you to succeed. And they’re not the only ones.

Guess Who Else Wants You to Succeed?
Yes, yes, I know your mama is delighted and tells everybody about how you’re going to be a big-shot attorney. But no, I’m not talking about your mother.
Believe it or not, the firm hired you because they want you to succeed. They’re excited about your capabilities and the talents and personality you bring to the firm. Yep, you heard me right but I’ll say it again just in case you didn’t get it the first time: **Your firm wants you to succeed.**

They may not show it in exactly the right ways but heck, the decision to hire and train you costs them money. You’re an investment. They want to make good on that investment.

And as you’ll see in the chapter on relationships at work, surprisingly, mentors are everywhere. Sure, look for your own kind, but also don’t miss out an incredible opportunity to be trained by someone who’s not at all like you.

**Most Importantly**

The strategies in the book only work though if you use them. Implement. (And, yes, that means if you were hoping that you could just read this book, absorb its wisdom, and be magically teleported to partnership, that’s not going to work.)

**Who’s Writing this Book?**

We may have taken different routes, but we both got to the same place: the Big Firm. I’m a product of a prep school education, Advanced Placement classes, a bucket load of extracurricular activities, and parents who insisted that I both believe in and live up to my capabilities. I’m a graduate of Harvard College *cum laude* and Harvard Law School. I’ve served as a Lecturer of Law at Harvard Law, working with bright, ambitious young minds like yours. I’m a woman of color, African-American to be exact. I worked at two prestigious law firms in Atlanta, GA, both a large firm and a boutique for five years. I know what it’s like to succeed within the law . . . and then to make the choice that my fame and fortune lay elsewhere. So now I’m a former practicing attorney.

I’m a coach who works with lawyers. I help unhappy lawyers figure out what’s making them unhappy so that they can create engaging, fulfilling, rewarding careers and lives—in or outside of the law.

**Oh, Yes, There’s Hope!**

Sure, as I warned you earlier, this book is going to give you some facts up front that are sobering. But if I left you with just that, you might be discouraged and disheartened. That’s not the point.

The point is to show you paths for achieving greatness within the practice of law, in spite of the obstacles. To give you much-needed encouragement and guidance. Hope.
That’s what coaching is about. Helping you find your way so that you can create the life and work that you want to have. And hope that it’s possible is the very first step.

So take heart. And a deep breath. You’ve embarked on an incredible journey not for the faint of heart. Your journey will be filled with joy and challenges, wonder and frustrations, exhilaration and trials (no pun intended). How exciting!