

CHAPTER 1



Unbeknownst to her, Janice Everson was heading for the chopping block.

She was driving her dark blue Audi up the freeway from Mission Beach to Sorrento Valley on an overcast summer day in San Diego County, California.

We call it “June Gloom” around here, and San Diegans don’t like it very much. We take any cloud in the sky as a personal affront, so days on end of a perpetual marine layer feels like an all-out onslaught on our sensibilities.

Today, though, the cloud cover over the ocean was nothing compared to the pall spreading over Janice’s internal landscape.

Everything had gone so well in the years since she took over as CEO of the small biotech company XinoniX. What she and her team had accomplished was nothing short of astounding. Teddy Garrison, the founder and leader, had

suddenly bailed out, and Janice and her team were forced to pick up the pieces in a hurry.

They did far more than that.

I'd known Janice for years at that point, and I always loved her passion for people and her tenacity in the face of obstacles. As both her coach and her friend, I saw up close that she was quick-witted, savvy, and intelligent, but she also had a deep heart for, and belief in, the people she worked with—and she wasn't afraid to show it.

So I wasn't in the least bit surprised when Janice eventually rose to the permanent CEO position of XinoniX. She took up the torch of Teddy's legacy and revitalized the culture around his founding principles, which he called The Radical LEAP: Love, Energy, Audacity, and Proof. They incorporated the principles into their performance appraisals, interview processes, management training, and rewards programs. They held each other accountable for living up to the ideals every day—even etching the words into the walls and windows of the corporate office as a permanent reminder of what they stood for. They galvanized their associates by creating a culture that at every level cultivated Love for the business and each other, generated the Energy and enthusiasm required to overcome any obstacle, inspired an Audacious all-possibilities mindset in their quest to change the world for the better, and provided Proof of their success by producing bottom-line results and by living up to their values, promises, and commitments. They went on to win awards from their peers in the industry, earn the admiration of the San Diego community, and secure spots as a

best place to work both in the county of San Diego and in the mid-sized biotech category nationally. And their customers loved them, too. A foray into the world of personal health tech garnered them a net promoter score that was the envy of the industry, and a rapid growth spurt landed them on the Inc 500 as the thirtieth fastest-growing company in the United States.

XinoniX's functioning as a well-oiled machine gave Janice the confidence to pursue her extracurricular pet project of bringing a program to high school students, equipping them with the tools to discover their purpose while they're still young and, through that, help them to find success in their adult lives. She was well aware—painfully at times—that she lived a life of great privilege. Yes, she'd earned it; no one had served up her station on a silver platter, but she saw that kids today seemed to be struggling more with finding themselves than her generation had. She desperately wanted to do her part in helping them find their way as she had done. It was a noble endeavor that gave her a lot of energy, and it served the additional benefit of launching XinoniX into the limelight as a shining example of corporate social responsibility. To give herself more time to focus on her passion project, Janice had personally recruited and added to the team an experienced, top-tier executive as the chief operating officer (COO) to run the increasingly complex day-to-day operations of the business.

In other words, Janice and her team had rocked it, bigtime.

I'm not saying it was because of the coaching work I'd done with her. And I'm not implying with false modesty that it really was that by saying that it *wasn't*. But because of my close relationship with Janice, I was privileged to have seen the XinoniX cultural transformation up close.

But now, for reasons that seem obvious in retrospect, everything was—what's the technical term for it?—going to shit.

And, for the record, I'm not saying that was because of my coaching, either.

The pandemic had blown the people of XinoniX apart—just like it had done to nearly every other business on the planet. In the aftermath of the living-in-Zoom times, Janice and her executive team had coaxed folks to return to the office for at least three days a week. And, at first, things just felt different. The laughter in the hallways was gone. Almost all had eschewed the by-then-optional mask wearing, and even though she found it lovely to see everyone's faces again, Janice noticed that the newly revealed expressions were more grim than glad. And instead of hanging out together and grabbing a drink after work, most people jetted off for home at the end of the workday. Or before.

Love? Energy? Not so much.

But little by little, the pre-pandemic work environment had returned, and most folks were in the office most days. The interpersonal dynamics were on the mend and people's physical and mental health had recovered well, but another kind of virus—a malaise of doubt, discouragement,

and a feeling of being undervalued—had taken hold in the still-recovering culture. And this one was being spread by a particular individual—and someone she had personally recruited to be on her own executive team, no less.

We still have some serious culture repair work to do, and I'm going to have to make some big changes at the top, she thought as she parked her car in the company lot and headed to the conference room where the board meeting was about to begin.

Filled with a vague sense of foreboding, Janice pulled open the heavy glass door and stepped inside.

She was right; there was a lot to be done. But she wouldn't get the chance to do it.

Because she'd had an ominous feeling about this meeting, Janice had asked me to accompany her, and I stepped into the conference room just moments after she'd arrived.

I'm sure I'm no different than most folks, but from the moment I walk into a room, I can feel the energy—the vibe. And this place felt as cold and thick as motor oil in the icebox.

I saw Janice being greeted by Alastair Langstrom, the current COO she'd personally recruited, and five members of the board. Maybe “greeted” is too generous a word, because when I looked around the room, they were anything but welcoming. Half smiles at best. A little bit of nervous laughter around the table. Langstrom shot me a quick, expressionless glance as he walked over to Janice, hand extended. She took it, gave him a quick, cursory shake, and took her seat at the head of the table. Langstrom

walked stiffly to the other end directly across from her, sat down, and motioned to everyone else to do the same. Which they did, in an increasingly awkward silence. I took a seat in the back.

I noticed, with a growing sense of unease, that the board members all had their eyes on Alley—not on Janice.

“Janice,” Langstrom said calmly. “The board is in agreement that the time has come for you and XinoniX to part ways.”

Son of a bitch, I thought, referring more to the situation than the speaker. *I really should have seen that coming*. And right then, that little time machine in my brain whisked me back through all the events leading up to this moment, starting with nearly one year earlier and the first time I’d met the now-infamous Alastair Langstrom.