

# AT THE READY by Sharon Michalove

## EXCERPT

### CHAPTER ONE

One secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when it comes.—  
Benjamin Disraeli

Chicago, February 2014  
Micki

TODAY'S THE DAY. Best suit. Flawless hair and makeup. Every inch the polished senior associate. No four-inch heels, though. Frederick Lanscombe, managing partner, is a little sensitive about his height and this meeting is the crucial first step in the campaign to be the next partner at Miller, Lanscombe, Baker, Francis, Masters, and Hargrove.

The door to the small conference room is wide open, Fred at the head of table, eating a donut. My mentor, Rebecca Masters smiles and gives me a small thumbs up. Tyler Miller nods to acknowledge I'm there. More than there. After a hundred years, this firm is still a boys' club but I plan to crack into top echelon and become just the second woman to make partner.

I fly through the door and end up on hands and knees when Hayden Forbes-Cartwright barrels into me. When I look up, Fred's donut is poised at his open mouth. Rebecca's hand is over her mouth. And Tyler laughs. "Great entrance, Micki." The censure I hear pricks my balloon of confidence.

A snigger erupts from Hayden as his big hand reaches down to pull me up. "So sorry, Micki. Couldn't put the brakes on in time."

Upright, balanced a little precariously on my toothpick heels, my glare has the heat of the Milky Way. Not that Hayden pays any attention. His bogus concern is yet one more layer of deceit. Still, points to him. I'm the klutz and he's the chivalric hero. "Have a seat, Micki, Hayden." Fred gives each of us a once over. Dressing well is one of the unspoken rules. Hayden's navy blue pinstripe is comparable to my silver gray jacket and matching pencil skirt—points even on wardrobe. My phone is in my lap and I pull up my spreadsheet. I've kept score since the first time we met. The advantage has seesawed back and forth, but we're competing for the pinnacle in the stakes race, so I'll have to up my game.

Hayden and I were adversaries from the get-go. We started here, on the same day eight years ago. Me half an hour early. Hayden fifteen minutes late strolling in with his uncle. All my muscles clenched when he looked me over with his the trademark devil-may-care smile.

“I know you received the memo. With Sonny Philips’ retirement, the firm will promote one associate to partner this year. As the two seniors, you will be the leading candidates.”

Hayden stops fiddling with his Chicago Yacht Club tie. “Does that mean other associates might be considered?”

“Technically, yes, but in reality you two are the only ones qualified right now. The partners will evaluate you on several criteria besides the competencies you’ve shown in your time here.”

He pauses.

Hayden rushes into the short silence. “Does every partner get a vote?”

“You know they do,” Tyler chides his nephew impatiently.

“And are some votes weighted more heavily than others? Like seniority?”

“No.” Rebecca’s response is explosive. “Please go on, Fred.”

When I glance toward Hayden, he shows no embarrassment, not even a slight flush. We all learn to put on a neutral face. I permit myself a very small smile. Minus five to Hayden.

Fred looks at the sheet in front of him, then from Tyler to Rebecca. They nod. “The criteria include enthusiasm, treatment of others, the opinion of your mentor, maintaining personal control, commitment, successful building and protection of your reputation and that of the firm, consistent hard work, always available, constant improvement, and most important—being perceived as trustworthy.”

Hayden’s eyes dart like tiny silverfish, his tell when he’s scheming. on how to get the edge. While I put in the long hours and never turn down a request, Hayden skates by, taking credit for the work of junior associates. Boasting about staying late when he disappears in the middle of the day. When your uncle’s name is on the door, you have an extra pass. Tyler Miller will definitely push for Hayden to be the next partner.

Fred is still talking and I wrench my attention back to his droning monotone. “Besides the formal evaluation, the other piece will be assisting Rebecca with a high-profile insider trading case. It’s more than usually sensitive because our client is a candidate for a Senate seat. He says he’s been set up. Not necessarily a strong or provable defense. You’ll be combing emails, social media, accounts, and documents to see what evidence you find.”

Bucket of nightcrawlers? Come on, Micki, try to show some enthusiasm. Can’t jump up and down.

“What a great opportunity for us to show what we’re made of.” Hayden’s wide smile and crackling delivery is phony as a carney barker’s come on.

Our managing partner nods his head approvingly. Hayden is his favored candidate too. Fred and Tyler have some kind of mutual admiration society and Hayden benefits.

Yeah, he’s a suck up.

My turn. *Say something but avoid the gush.* “This is a amazing challenge. I really appreciate the chance to work on a case so important to the future and reputation of the firm and, potentially beyond, Fred.”

Rebecca produces a small smile, so I hope I’ve hit the right note.

As we walk out, she stops me. “Micki, I have a lunch appointment, but let’s have a drink after work.” She looks around but doesn’t see anyone in lurking mode. “We haven’t had a good chat for a while.”

“Great, Rebecca. Just come by my office when you’re ready to leave.”

Then I cancel my date for the evening. Work comes first, always.

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The Gage is lively at five thirty. After-work drinks have replaced the three-martini lunch, unless you’re Hayden Forbes-Cartwright. He indulges in both.

Rebecca manages to get us a quiet table in a corner near the tile fireplace. We won’t have to shout and have less likelihood of being overheard.

After the drinks are ordered, she pulls out a legal pad. “Thought we could go over some strategies for the work. My thought is that you’ll work on the emails, social media, anything online and whatever documents we can upload. That way, while you’re traveling, you’ll have plenty of material to access.”

“That would be great. I’ve been anxious about being away at such a crucial point in my career.”

The pencil between Rebecca’s fingers moves up and down like a seesaw. “Thanks to technology. Years ago we were tied to the office, the library. I’m glad you can go to the awards ceremony. Kind of like the Oscars for authors.”

“Yeah. Still five working days away...”

“Our new legal research assistant is already busy organizing everything as documentation comes in.”

A Paris Rose is put in front of Rebecca, who pushes her legal pad to the side, but not before a few drops splash onto the paper, leaving a light pink trail. My Jabberwock is in a coupe. She takes a sip just as the cheese board is deposited in the middle of the table along with a basket of fried pickles. Cheese is a magnet for me. My grabby fingers snatch some almost before the server gets the platter on the table.

“Simon Greenberg is an attorney with Talcott, Maier, and current Republican candidate for Senate from Illinois. The SEC received a tip claiming he made use of private information to trade stocks from several companies he represents. After an investigation, the Commission decided on civil charges. Unfortunately, because his candidacy has made him a public figure, criminal charges are pending as well. Maybe some questions about election finance too.”

“Wait. Shouldn’t Hayden be here?” Not that I want him, but if we’re a team, he deserves the same explanations.

“Hayden has already been briefed.”

*Be professional. In control. Pretend it doesn’t matter.*

“Oh. I see.” But I don’t. Not at all.

Rebecca takes a huge swallow of the pink liquid. “Not by me. After our meeting, Tyler and Fred took Hayden to lunch and briefed him there.”

How does she know? Or is this an assumption? My heated protest escapes before I can rein it in. “But it’s your case.”

She waves the comment away. “He was so full of himself when he got back. Swanned into my office. ‘Simon Greenberg, huh. I wondered after the rumors flying around. Good for us.’ Then he laughed and walked out.” Her scowl could freeze the Chicago River. “I was sure Tyler at least would make sure he’s up to speed and I wanted to get you in the loop right away. I wouldn’t be surprised if Fred and Tyler didn’t give Hayden some instruction on how to handle things and he will take advantage of the time you are away in April.”

My cocktail beckons and I chug it down, sputtering slightly. “Should I cancel the trip?”

She ignores that. “You’ll meet the client tomorrow, so make a strong impression. You’ll have plenty of work to do while you’re out of the office. Get your laptop set up with VPN. It will be your lifeline to the firm. Video meetings will help too. Make sure you can report on progress every day. A strong impression while you’re in Paris will give you a leg up.”

We see the waiter in the distance and Rebeccas catches his attention. Once we have refills, she takes a sip, then leans forward. “Show you’re dedicated to the firm and the case and that you can work without supervision. I’ll try to schedule the meetings first thing in the morning to mitigate the seven-hour time difference.”

“And the other complications?”

“Hayden is one, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. More in terms of your selection as partner. That will be decided long before the case is finished. But he’ll push for every plum he can pluck. The other is that because of the election cycle, Greenberg is pushing to get this cleared up or buried quickly. News of the pending charges will hit the papers tomorrow.”

Why haven’t they leaked already?

Rebecca must be a mind reader. “The papers are planning front-page splashes with stories, commentary, and reactions on at least two inside pages.”

I can picture the *Tribune*. Huge headline and photos on their broadsheet front page. Stories about the investigation, the campaign, lots of background on the candidate, a piece where the rest of the field comments. Then an editorial on the op-ed pages. Maybe a political cartoon. The *Sun-Times* tabloid format will be just as comprehensive in a more compact form. “Collusion?”

“Cooperation.” Her forehead wrinkles, brows touching. The corners of her mouth turn down.

“Keeping him from making incendiary comments is going to be a job in itself. We want as little coverage as possible while we work on clearing him—if we can. The damage to his reputation is a gift to the other contenders. He’s been the front runner, the poster boy for the party.”

In two swallows, the Jabberwock has disappeared. I order another, then cram more cheese into my mouth.

“Hey, guys. Didn’t get the memo.” Hayden pushes into the tufted leather booth and reaches for a pickle, almost knocking me to the floor. “Uncle Tyler thought you might be here, Rebecca. Said it’s your usual watering hole.”

“A casual afterwork drink.” Rebecca’s voice is flat.

Hayden reaches over and taps her legal pad. “Sure you aren’t strategizing?” The twinkle in his eye shows malice, not amusement. “By the way, I met Laney this afternoon. She’s a cutie.”

“Laney?” The name is unfamiliar.

With a leer, he says, “Our legal researcher. Fresh out of her paralegal program.”

The server comes by with my third drink.

“Are you running a tab?”

Rebecca nods.

“Two Satan’s Whiskers. Need to play catch up with these two.” His smirk makes my skin crawl.

“How appropriate.”

He snickers. My snarky comment bounces off his crocodile hide.

Before the drinks guy can take off, I hold up a hand. “I’d like to order something to go.”

Pad out, he looks a bit like a bird, head to the side.

“Shrimp cocktail with no sauce, and the Apple Salad. Just put the shrimp on top of the salad with the dressing on the side.”

“You got it.”

Hayden puffs out his chest like a pouter pigeon. “Me, I have a date as soon as I finish these truly spectacular drinks.”

“Drinks named just for you.”

He grins. “You know it. Scary but seductive. And I have some seducing on tap.”

Probably with our new researcher. I push the sour feelings back. “Have fun.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

Rebecca’s warning look doesn’t make any impression either. She grabs her coat off the empty seat. “Off to have dinner with my hubby. He’s cooking tonight.”

I trudge to the office, takeout container in hand, ready for a little research of my own.