

The First One's Free

the rest you pay for with your life



by

B.L. Wilson

The First One's Free

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Edited by BZ Hercules
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Author's Note

The First One's Free, the rest you pay for with your life was written and takes place in a time when technology was somewhat more simple. You will find references to flip phones and people not being as easy to reach as they are now. Social media was nonexistent, at least not like it is in the present day, and most of my characters did not feel incomplete without a cell phone. Updating the technology might change the plot elements, so I have left the “old-fashioned” ways untouched and request that you enjoy this bit of “nostalgia” as it is written.

Thank you.

B.L. Wilson

Dedication

Sometimes, when a good friendship is tested...truly tested, the people involved discover what they cannot do or will not for a friend. Both people leave the friendship disappointed. They think: I didn't know this person as well as I thought I did.

Other times, when a good friendship is tested, the people involved discover how much they care for that friend. How they are willing to give the shirt from their back or lay down their life for that friend. Both people stay in the friendship surprised and elated. They think: I didn't know the person as well as I thought I did.

I'm dedicating this book to both sides of the same coin.

It's not the size of the dog in the fight.

It's the size of fight in the dog.

~Mark Twain~

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CHAPTER ONE ... Stuff and Nonsense

The dream was always the same whenever Ramona Martin had it. Someone would say, “Stay with me; it’s all right.” With the gentlest of touches, she’d feel pressure against her neck, like someone was taking her pulse, and then strong arms lifted her as a parent carries a young child. The same person would take her somewhere. She always woke up before the dream ended, never discovering the location of the place or the identity of the person who carried her. She wondered if she woke up before the dream ended because carrying her meant she’d lost her independence. The thought was so disturbing that it roused her or her own internal clock forced itself into her dream and awakened her.

Ramona rose to go to the bathroom and then stood looking at her reflection in the medicine cabinet. “Oh well, another day and another dollar,” she muttered to the brown-skinned, not-too-tall woman peering back at her in the mirror. It was time to dress and go to work. She turned on the shower and waited for the water to warm up.



Ramona nodded to Larry, the security guard stationed at the side entrance of 80 Centre Street. Once Larry knew her, he never asked to see her ID. If she resigned from the job or lost her job, he’d know that too. He wouldn’t let her inside the

building without phoning upstairs to double-check her status. With the heightened security these days, Larry should have asked her for ID before he pressed the turnstile release button, but he didn't. He had known her for the eight years she'd been an Assistant District Attorney. He'd watched her move through the courthouse's legal system from an inexperienced fledgling attorney who handled misdemeanors to the experienced trial lawyer assigned to homicide cases.

Larry grinned broadly, showing an overbite of pearly white teeth in a light olive complexion. "Good morning, Miss Martin." He nodded at her as she stood in front of him. "Looks like it's gonna be a beautiful day. Not too warm and not too hot, just the way I like 'em."

"Yes, Larry, I agree. I had a pleasant drive this morning. All the nutty drivers must have been still in bed when I drove down here." Ramona sighed. Her eyes followed the direction of his gaze and looked outside at the wonderful spring-like morning. "It makes you wish you could be strolling around Foley Square instead of here, doesn't it?"

Larry nodded. "I know what you mean, Miss Martin. I wouldn't mind a couple of days off with this kind of weather."

Ramona sighed as she lugged her overstuffed briefcase to the gang of staff elevators. "Larry, you take care."

"Yes, Ma'am. I'll do that." Larry smiled at her as she stepped toward the elevator. "You have a good one too."

When Ramona arrived on her floor, she could hear the low buzzing sound of people talking inside her office. She decided to enter her office through the back way. She walked around the corner and unlocked the rear door that exited onto a narrow corridor close to the elevator.

To the untrained eye, the rear exit looked like the door to a storage closet or janitor's washroom, which made it a perfect escape route if Ramona ever needed one. Lucky for her, in the eight years she'd been with the District Attorney's office, she

hadn't used the exit for that purpose. She'd beep Alberta Johnston when she arrived at her desk to let her know she was open for business. From the sounds in the waiting area just outside her office, she'd say it was going to be busy today. She sighed. That meant another twelve-hour day of interviews.



“**L**ook, Miss...” the solid-looking woman said as she glanced at the brass nameplate on the secretary’s desk. “...Ms. Johnston, me and my son have been waiting here all day. We arrived at ten this morning. It’s three thirty. I can’t wait any longer. We’re gonna see your boss.” The woman grasped her little boy’s hand and urged him to come with her. She hesitated and then whispered to the little boy, “Kurtis, I want you to stay with the nice woman, Miss Johnston, while I go talk with her boss. Okay?”

“Okey dokey, old Smokey!” Kurtis nodded vigorously. He grinned at his mama when she bent down to kiss his little forehead.

Alberta Johnston noticed the determined look in the tall woman’s eyes and grew alarmed by it. She’d noticed the woman when she’d first arrived. She remembered thinking how patient she was with her little boy, who’d finally fallen asleep in her lap hours ago. With an office full of clients, she’d lost track of him and his mother. The little guy seemed like a good kid. She looked up at the woman’s annoyed face and then down at his cute little face. She decided he didn’t resemble his mother, but she’d bet he’d grow up to be tall and sturdy like she was.

She hoped the woman wasn’t a person who tended to get physical when she was angry or she’d have to call down to security. The woman looked strong enough to do real damage, but she was also patient since she’d waited quietly for hours to

speaking with ADA Martin. "I'm sorry for the delay, Miss. It'll just be a little longer. ADA Martin is interviewing witnesses. Some of them take longer to tell a story than others do. Can you just wait a few minutes more? I know ADA Martin will want to see you today." Alberta added one of her engaging smiles, designed to keep Remy's clients at bay and calm them down when the need arose.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," the solid-looking woman said politely. "I got nothing more to lose here today except my kid. Could you watch him while I go talk to ADA Martin?" She suddenly plopped the cute little boy on top of the desk and then strode down the short hallway she'd seen a man enter two minutes ago.

"Hey, stop! You can't go in there! She's with another client," Alberta bellowed. She rose to stop the solid-looking woman until she saw the desperate look in the woman's eyes as she turned to face her before continuing down the short hallway. Alberta slowly sank back down in her chair, staring at the woman's cute little boy. "I'd better buzz my boss and tell her your mama's on her way, Little Man." She buzzed her boss on the ancient intercom. "Remy, you're about to get an angry visitor in about a minute. Her name is..." Her manicured finger moved down the list of names and times on the sign-in sheet until it settled on the right one. "...Ms. Sneed... Tracey Sneed."

Ramona cleared her throat, then spoke into the intercom. "Thank you, Alberta."

"Is there a problem, Remy?" the man sitting in front of her asked with a grin. He'd heard the secretary's announcement over the intercom.

Ramona looked at her colleague, Assistant District Attorney Eldridge Ford, rolled her eyes upward, and grinned. "You know how dramatic Bertie can be sometimes, Pug. It's probably just another citizen annoyed because they had to wait. Go on with what you were saying about the Drexel case."

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The door to her office sprang open suddenly. An angry Black Amazon she didn't recognize suddenly confronted her. At least, the woman looked like an Amazon, she mused, looking up into large chocolate brown eyes. They weren't chocolate brown, Ramona decided. Her eyes were more of an earth brown with highlights of gold around the iris. She had interesting eyes set in a warm brown face with full, kissable lips. Kissable lips ... where did that thought come from? The irritated female giant standing in front of her was visibly upset. Yet here she was admiring the big woman as though they were in a singles' bar somewhere in the Village.

Ramona stood up slowly and put her hands palms up in front of her in a gesture meant to placate. She didn't want to alarm the angry woman. "May I help you, Ms. Sneed?" she asked in her best soothing tone.

"So you know my name, Ms. Martin?" Tracey Sneed snapped at the ADA. She loomed over the desk, crossed her arms over an impressive, generous chest, and glared down at the much shorter woman. "That's real funny! When I called your office fifty million times, nobody remembered who I was. Nobody let me speak with you." She pointed an accusing finger at Ramona's chest for emphasis. "YOU never called me back like your secretary said you would!"

"Oh, I see—er. I mean..." Ramona stammered as she stared into earth brown eyes. "I'm sorry, Ms. Sneed. It's just that my caseload has been pretty intense lately, so I..."

The Black Amazon held up a hand. "I don't give a shit about your caseload! Last night, my kid and I almost died in a fire set at my house. I think we both know who set it. What are you gonna do about it?" Angry, dark eyes glinted at Ramona and then narrowed. She put broad hands on wide hips.

Sneed, Sneed. Why does that name ring a bell? Ramona frowned as she tried to remember the case but drew a blank.

The Amazon read the frown on Ramona's face correctly as confusion. "You still don't know who I am, do you? Goddamn it!" She suddenly banged on Ramona's desk with a large fist and shoved the closest stack of papers. Some of the papers scattered across the desk, while others tumbled to the ground. "I shouldn't have agreed to testify! I'm just another freaking footnote in a case file to you!" She was angry enough to hit somebody. But she slammed an open hand on the desk and leaned on it, towering over Ramona, trying to intimidate her. "Damn you."

Eldridge Ford sat mesmerized by the interaction between his subordinate and the big woman until she knocked the papers to the ground. The noise they made hitting the floor spurred him into action. "Ramona, do you want me to call security?" He yanked out a cell phone from his jacket as he eyed the outraged woman.

The Black Amazon turned around suddenly and glared at Eldridge Ford as he sat glued to his seat. He became the focus of her anger. "Another freaking country heard from! Yeah, you son of a bitch, call the cops. That'd be a fitting climax to all this shit!" She turned around to target Ramona with hard eyes.

Ramona noticed an acrid smell to the woman's clothing, then saw the dark smudges across the back of her blouse. "No, no, Pug. It's all right. Could you excuse us, please?" She signaled to her friend and boss to put the phone back in his pocket and then leave. "I believe Ms. Sneed and I have something to discuss."

Executive Assistant District Attorney Eldridge Ford coldly stared at Tracey Sneed's back, deciding she was all talk. He dismissed her in an annoyed sigh and addressed Ramona. "Are you sure about this, Remy?" He looked at the big woman's back and signaled his friend with his eyes.

Ramona read the question in his eyes and then nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. Give us some privacy, Pug."

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Tracey Sneed suddenly turned, catching him in mid-signal. "I believe she asked you to leave, Little Man. Why don't you just get the hell out?"

They faced off for a minute.

Tracey studied the senior ADA, reading the implied threat in his hard eyes and the fighting stance in his body's gestures. She pointed a thumb at ADA Martin. "Don't worry, Mister Pug, I'm not gonna hurt your precious little friend. The last thing I need is jail, where the bastards can really do a number on me. I love my kid too much to make that kind of trouble."

Eldridge rose from his seat, gathered his files, and marched stiffly to the door. "Ramona, I expect a call from your secretary in an hour telling me you're all right. You got one goddamned hour... Ms. Sneed, is it? You touch a hair on her head and you'll need help when you leave the building in handcuffs," he remarked disdainfully as he glared at Tracey Sneed.

Ramona nodded. "I'll be fine, Pug. I'll call you in an hour." She walked around her desk to pick up the files from the floor that Tracey Sneed had knocked down in her fury.

Tracey watched the little man leave, deciding she'd like to kick his little butt just for so. He was a first-class asshole. After she took care of Mister Pug, she'd like to shake the shit out of ADA Ramona Martin for getting her into this mess. She stared at the shapely, stocking-covered legs the ADA's short skirt showed off when she walked around her desk. She sighed as she watched ADA Martin stretch out to reach the last of the folders on the floor in front of her.

"Look, I'm sorry I lost my head, Ms. Martin." Tracey knelt down and picked up the folder under her left foot. "Here." She shoved a disorganized folder into Ramona's hands. "I can't deal with this any longer. I need to talk to somebody about this case." She scratched the back of her head, then patted her wiry dreadlocks back in place as she paced around the small office.

“I can’t be a witness in this case, Ms. Martin. It’s too dangerous for me and my kid.” She turned around to face Ramona.

Ramona pressed the old intercom. “Bertie, do I have any appointments out there?”

“I took the liberty of rescheduling the last one for tomorrow morning.”

Ramona smiled. “Thanks, Bertie.” She looked up into dark brown eyes that reminded her of a soft, sleek sable coat with subtle undertones of a lighter brown. “Take a seat, Ms. Sneed. Please explain what you mean.” She pointed to the high-backed metal chair, recently vacated by the man Tracey Sneed mockingly referred to as “Little Man.” She smiled inwardly, knowing the Sneed woman inadvertently pissed her best friend off when she called him by that name. Pug was sensitive about his height. He had been that way since they were children.

Tracey Sneed shook her head. “I can’t sit still. I’m too nervous.” She continued to stride back and forth in front of Ramona’s desk.

“Look, Ms. Sneed, you’re making me uncomfortable with your pacing,” Ramona said, watching her for a few moments longer. “Please sit down.” She pointed to the chair again.

“Okay, I’ll try.” Tracey rubbed the back of her neck and sat down. She fidgeted in the high-backed chair, nervously jiggling sturdy thighs. Her stomach growled loudly. She smoothed a hand down the yellow button-down blouse that she wore tucked into baggy jeans. “Excuse me. I’m sorry about that,” her throaty voice rumbled. “I haven’t eaten today. Your case...the one you want me to testify...I can’t do it.”

“Why not, Ms. Sneed? Why can’t you testify?” Ramona stared at the woman as she spoke, watching her sit stiffly on the edge of the metal chair. It registered somewhere inside Ramona’s head the woman said she hadn’t eaten all day. “My secretary mentioned you had a child with you..?”

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Tracey nodded. She wondered why the sudden interest in Kurtis. "Yes, I have a son. Why?"

"Is he with you? When was the last time he ate, Ms. Sneed?" Ramona asked in an accusing tone.

"He had a sandwich from the vending machine about an hour ago. Damn thing took my last dollar bill too." The big woman shrugged and then her shoulders stiffened and her eyes narrowed when she realized what ADA Martin was saying. "You son of a bitch! You think I'd let my son starve, Lady?"

Ramona frowned, then rubbed her temples. "No, I didn't mean to imply that you wouldn't feed your son, Ms. Sneed. I just thought that you might have been so focused on your mission that you..." Under the woman's harsh stare, she swallowed her next words. "I'm not sure what I meant."

Tracey sighed heavily and then blurted out, "I work, Lady. I'm not on welfare or disability. I earn more than enough money to feed and clothe my kid! Shit, that's what got me in all this trouble. You still don't remember the case, do you?" She glared at Ramona, who had taken a seat behind her desk and sat quietly watching her. She wanted shake the little ADA until she remembered the case. She pulled out a grimy-looking paper, which looked a lot like a legal notice, but didn't give it to Ramona.

"Ask your secretary to look up the Garcia case. I'll wait right here while you read it through. I got no place to go but the Red Cross Center," Tracey muttered, issuing a weary yawn and trying to cover it with a large hand. "Excuse me...I... had a busy... night," she mumbled as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

Ramona raised an eyebrow.

"Don't pay me any mind. I'm just tired ... a little dead on my feet. Give me a minute and I'll be fine," Tracey mumbled, slightly incoherent as she started to drift off to sleep in the chair.

Alberta knocked on the door, then poked her head inside the office. “Oh good, Remy, you’re still in here. Would you mind if I laid him down in here?” She pushed the door open wider with her foot and then nodded at the worn-looking couch.

Ramona could see a sleepy little boy in her arms. “Come in, Bertie. Put him on the couch. Wait a minute. I’ve got a sheet and blanket somewhere.” She rummaged through file drawers until she pulled out a sheet and then a blanket. She walked over to the couch and spread the sheet on it. She took the child from her secretary, laid him gently down on the couch, and covered him with the blanket, patting his little back.

Tracey Sneed was too exhausted to protest the special attention paid to her son. Her mind was drifting. It surprised her that an ADA would do that for a stranger’s child.

“Bertie, could you bring me the Garcia folder, please? I need to review it,” Ramona spoke softly.

“Sure, Remy. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” Alberta turned away from the sleeping guests to hide her next words and whispered to her boss, “What do you want me to tell ADA Ford when he calls again? He’s worried about your safety. He’s called ten times asking if Tracey Sneed killed you. I don’t know why he’d think that. She doesn’t look violent to me; just desperate and at the end of her rope. Want me to check on the story she gave you about the fire at her place last night?”

“How did you know about that one?” Ramona stared at her secretary in amazement.

“It’s no special magic, Remy. Pug flew out of your office, mumbling about the woman calling him a midget and acting crazy as a loon,” Alberta whispered. “He said she lied about the fire in her house too!” She sighed, then again whispered to Ramona, “Boss, do you want me to check out the fire story?”

Ramona nodded and then studied the woman slumped down in the chair. *She must be uncomfortable, trying to sleep in that*

chair. “Let’s not wake them. Call me on my cell when you find out. Okay?”

“Gotcha, Boss. What about ADA Ford?” Bertie asked, keeping her voice low as she stood at the door, waiting for an answer.

“Tell him I’m fine. If I need him, I’ll call him,” Ramona said, looking over her shoulder at the woman sleeping in the chair across from her battle-weary, city issued-desk. “How about ordering them a couple of sandwiches from the deli?” Why was she entertaining the woman who threatened her with bodily harm earlier and the cute kid hiccupping in his sleep on her couch? She didn’t need the trouble she sensed from the woman. She was doing it because she felt guilty, that was why. She should have known this case by heart, but she couldn’t remember a damned thing about it.

Alberta nodded and disappeared for ten minutes. She tiptoed back into the office, bringing two thick case files with her. She noted the boy’s mother struggling to keep her eyes open. She walked over to the straight-back chair to squeeze Tracey Sneed’s solid shoulder. “Dear? Ms. Sneed? There’s enough room on the couch for two adults. Go lie down with your little boy. It’s a lot more comfortable than sleeping in that chair. Remy and I’ll be here when you wake up. We’re used to keeping late hours in this joint.” She guided the tired woman to the couch and then helped her get comfortable. She covered Tracey Sneed and her sleeping child with Ramona’s blanket. “I’ll make those calls, Remy,” she whispered, tiptoeing out the door. “Oh, I almost forgot. I told Pug what you said. He didn’t like it one bit, but you knew he wouldn’t. He finally agreed not to call you again tonight. Tomorrow is another story, Remy.” Alberta frowned. “If the fire story turns out to be true, Remy, after you two talk, it’s gonna be too late for Tracey Sneed and the boy to see Red Cross for shelter. Are you up for taking in guests tonight?”

Ramona nodded at the couch containing two tired people. “I don’t have much of a choice. It’s not as though I don’t have the room. You know my place is big enough for several families, Bertie.”

“Yes, I know it is. I just wasn’t sure you would.”

Ramona watched Alberta leave to make the phone calls before she took the files and started to read old interview notes. Periodically, she took off her reading glasses to rub tired eyes and then walked over to check on her guests. They were sleeping peacefully. Her journey to the couch gave her a chance to study the woman. She noted Tracey Sneed’s face relaxed in slumber. She liked the distinctive cheekbones and the full lips, but her nose was the most interesting part of her face. It was long, narrow, and slightly hooked. She wondered if Ms. Sneed had a touch of Native American in her ancestry.

The Sneed woman pushed the blanket down to her waist as she slept. It gave Ramona the opportunity to examine her body from a few feet away. She noted the large, full breasts, solid waist, and sturdy thighs partly covered by the sheet. The little boy snuggled into his mother’s chest, sleeping peacefully. She wondered what it would be like to exchange places with Tracey’s son and snuggle against those large comforting breasts.

She sighed. Where was her mind going? Why was she imagining doing things with a woman she’d just met? *Let’s keep this professional*, her inner voice warned. She walked back to her desk, then stretched and twisted, trying to get kinks out of her back. She sat down, eyeing the two thick folders sitting across several other folders on her desk. It was time to read the Garcia case, she mused, picking up a folder to open it. Her cell phone chirped. She hurried to search her desk for the phone before the noise roused her two guests.

“ADA Martin here,” Ramona murmured softly, eyeing her guests.

“Remy, I just got off the phone with my friend in NYFD. Tracey Sneed’s home burned down last night. The fire started inside the walls. My friend said it looked like poor wiring until they found a contraption that shorts out wiring melded inside one of the wall switches. The arson squad labeled the fire suspicious. They haven’t told Ms. Sneed yet.” Alberta sighed. “You know, she was their first suspect. When they found the device, they crossed her off their suspect list, thinking she wouldn’t have the technical expertise to do it. Isn’t the Sneed woman supposed to testify against a police officer?”

“You’ve got a good memory, Bertie.” Ramona sighed.

“No, not really, Remy,” Alberta replied. “I took the liberty of skimming the folders before I gave them to you. What do you think about her and the boy? Are you going to help them or not?”

“Damn it, Bertie! You already know the answer to that question,” Ramona hissed loudly into her cell.

Alberta smiled at her boss’s indignant response. “I was just making sure my instincts were still reliable, Dear. Oh, did I mention the sandwiches are here? Want me to bring them to you?”

“Yeah, I’m kinda hungry. I hope you bought enough for the woman and her son.”

“I ordered five. Do you think that’s enough?”

“That’ll be just fine, Bertie. Yeah, bring them. I think Sleeping Beauty is about to get up,” Ramona said softly, watching the Sneed woman stretch and then quietly swing long legs over the end of the couch. She reached over to re-cover her son with the blanket and then kissed his forehead.

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