

WILLIAM BERNHARDT

PRIMARY JUSTICE

A big Midwest law firm
is manipulating millions...
and murder.



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William Bernhardt

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Ben Kincaid is a lawyer because he wants to see justice served. He soon discovers that a law firm is no place to look for justice. . . .

Alvin Hager is always one step ahead of every young associate. But one of these days he's bound to make a mistake that could cost him. . . .

Richard Derek is the partner in charge. He's convinced he knows everything, but he doesn't begin to know the half of it. . . .

Christina McCall is Ben's legal assistant. Her past is sketchy, but she's smart and fearless, and right now the only ally Ben has. . . .

Jonathan Adams is the client. For a vice president of a multimillion-dollar firm, he looks rather shabby. Why anyone would want to kill him is anyone's guess. . . .

* Prologue *

“Once again,” the man said, pulling the little girl along by the leash tied to his wrist and hers. Tell me your name.”

“I don’t remember,” the girl said.

“Where do you live?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Are you from Tulsa?”

“I don’t remember.” The girl answered emotionlessly, like an automaton.

“Slower. Speak more hesitantly. It must *seem* as though you’re trying to remember. Who are your parents?”

“I don’t remember.”

The two emerged from the bottom of the gray stone stairwell and walked into the sunken parking garage. The rising sun was just visible in the high windows on the east side of the garage. The red corona was just beginning to filter across the skyline and cast an orange halo around the rooftops and skyscrapers of downtown Tulsa. Sunlight barely survived the passage through the dirty glass windows of the garage, though, and since the garage had little lighting of its own, the two figures remained enveloped in gray.

The two moved in concert, past an elevator shaft,

across a double aisle of parked cars, toward a black sedan. The little girl, who appeared to be seven, perhaps eight, was dressed in a simple white pinafore over a blue dress, which accentuated the vivid blue of her eyes. Her face seemed unnaturally white, as if she had spent her entire life shielded from the sun. Her long black hair was pulled behind her head and tied in a French braid.

As they came near the sedan, the girl began to drag her heels. The leash connecting the two drew taut. The man turned and looked at her. He frowned but said nothing. He yanked firmly on the leash and pulled her toward him.

At that instant, a woman ran screaming out of the stairwell. She was wearing only a tattered blue bathrobe that flapped open as she ran. Her dark, unwashed hair hung limply from her head. She was barefoot. She was followed closely by another woman, an older, heavy-set woman wearing a white uniform. The large woman was also running, doing her best to catch up to the woman in the bathrobe.

The first woman ran across the garage, whimpering, her arms stretched forward. She looked frantically in all directions, then saw the man and the girl bound to him. She raced toward them. The heavy-set woman could not keep pace.

The man stepped forward and pushed the little girl behind him. The woman ran without stopping and collided violently into his body, throwing the man back against the sedan. They wrestled for a moment, arms gyrating wildly, and the woman cut the man's face with her fingernails. Angered, the man grabbed both her wrists and twisted them painfully behind her back.

The little girl began to cry. "Stop it!" she pleaded. "Stop it! You're hurting her!" She kicked the man in the soft part of his right shin.

The man's face was transfigured with rage. Clenching his teeth, he placed both of the woman's wrists into his left hand, and, with his right, he clutched the little girl by the neck and slammed her against the side of the sedan. The girl blinked rapidly and fell down in a limp heap on the gray stone floor.

At last the heavy-set woman caught up with them. While the man twisted both of his captive's wrists behind her back, the other woman wrapped a thick, leather belt around her chest and upper arms. She pulled the leather belt tight. Reaching into her skirt pocket, she withdrew a syringe and, almost without looking at it, she pushed the air bubble through the tip and jabbed the needle into the struggling woman's right arm. Almost instantaneously, the woman in the bathrobe relaxed. Her whole body seemed to weaken and become limp.

The man and the uniformed woman exchanged a quick, penetrating look. *This won't happen again*, she told him, without speaking. *Ever*. She took hold of the leather belt and pushed the other woman toward the stairwell.

The man bent down next to the little girl's body. He pulled open one of her eyelids, then placed his two forefingers against her neck. *Fine*.

Sunlight was beginning to penetrate the dirty windowpanes of the garage, and he realized that he was behind schedule. He had intended to be far away from here long before the sun rose. He opened the car door, bundled the girl into his arms, and spread her across the backseat of the sedan. He untied the leash and tossed it on the floor;

then he closed the back door. Glancing quickly at his watch, he slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and hurriedly drove out of the parking garage.

PART ONE

*** ***

A Bumblebee and Reverie

* 1 *

Benjamin Kincaid glanced at his watch.

It was 9:05. Well, the recruiting coordinator had warned him that orientation might start late. Ben's stomach growled—rather loudly. The other young lawyers looked up. Ben looked away, as if he had heard the rumbling noise somewhere on his far left. Should've gotten up early enough to fix breakfast, he thought. Professionals always eat breakfast. Strong body, strong mind, and all that. But he hadn't risen until the third blast of the snooze alarm; he couldn't risk being late on the first day of work, so he had to do without.

He drummed his fingers on a tabletop. A gnawing sensation, unrelated to hunger, was eating away at the pit of his stomach. He felt uneasy, and he didn't know why.

He surveyed the room. The new class of associates at Raven, Tucker & Tubb were sitting in the office lobby, discreetly appraising one another. Six of them were men; two were women. The men wore suits that came in two colors: blue or gray, with the occasional daring leap to blue-gray or perhaps blue with a gray pinstripe. Every shirt was stiff, button-down, and white. The women were dressed in complex pseudo-suits with scarf ties and high-collar blouses; the kind of suit, Ben supposed, that didn't

threaten male colleagues, probably because women don't look very good in them.

There was no conversation. Each young lawyer watched and waited.

Ben glanced at the thin, toothy young man in the gray suit sitting next to him.

"You suppose they've forgotten about us?" the man asked.

Ben smiled faintly. "I doubt it. They're just busy. This is a very busy law firm." What a pompous thing to say, Ben thought, immediately embarrassed by his third-rate small talk. As if he knew anything about the work load at Raven, Tucker & Tubb.

"That's a fact," the young man agreed. He had a drawn, pasty-white face, close-cropped brown hair, and a wispy beard covering a bad complexion. Every whisker was working overtime to create the illusion of a full beard. "Productivity is up by an average of eighteen percent, with variances for different departments. Litigation is up almost twenty-five percent; environmental, of course, is in the sewer. Gross revenues are up half a million dollars over the previous fiscal year. Given the current economic slump in the Southwest, that's an extremely impressive financial performance."

Ben stared at him. "How do you know these things?"

"Oh, I've done my research. I had numerous offers of employment, you know. I was in a position to be selective."

Ben was relieved to find his brief moment of pomposity completely eclipsed. "I see. By the way, my name is Ben Kincaid."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Alvin Hager." Alvin took Ben's

hand and gave it a nerve-dulling handshake. "Maybe we'll get to work together. Are you a Tulsa native?"

"No," Ben replied. "Just moved."

"Got any family here?"

"No. Well, not really. A brother-in-law. Ex-brother-in-law, actually. He's a cop."

"Left Mom and Pop back home?"

"Mom and—" He closed his eyes for a moment, then began again. "How about you? Any family in town?"

"No," Alvin answered. "I'm on my own. Of course, I wanted it that way. I want to pull myself up by my own bootstraps, or not at all."

"Of course."

"Excuse me, but didn't you used to work at the D.A.'s office in Oklahoma City?"

Ben turned and saw a brown-haired woman in her mid-twenties wearing rectangular tortoiseshell eyeglasses.

"Yes, I worked with the district attorney," Ben answered. "How did you know?"

The woman leaned forward. She was dressed in a two-piece gray suit with a paisley scarf wrapped tightly around her neck and a small ivory cameo in the center. Ben wondered if it was difficult for her to talk with a scarf and cameo clutching her throat. "I was clerking at the public defender's office during my third year of law school. I was at the D.A.'s all the time. What made you decide to leave and go into private practice?"

"Oh . . ." Ben searched for words but didn't find any. "A variety of factors."

"Like forty-eight K a year, right?" Alvin said, grinning. "C'mon, Ben, we're co-workers now. You can play straight with us. We understand."

Ben smiled pleasantly but said nothing.

"I am incredibly ill-mannered," the woman said abruptly, slapping herself on the side of her head. "I haven't even introduced myself. My name is"—she hesitated—"Marianne Gunnerson." She shook hands with Ben and Alvin. "Tell me, guys, confidentially. Do you think Marianne is okay? I mean, for a name."

Ben looked at Alvin out the corner of his eye, then back at Marianne. "It's . . . *your* name, isn't it?" he said.

"But don't you think it's too feminine? I mean, for a lawyer." She picked up a magazine from the coffee table and rolled it into a tube shape. "I don't think it's a good lawyer name."

"What would be a good lawyer name?" Ben asked, genuinely curious.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. She began to beat time on the coffee table with the tubed magazine. "Lilian. Claire. Margaret, maybe."

"Forget Margaret," Alvin said. "The firm already has two Margarets. Three, if you count middle names. You'd be lost in the shuffle."

Ben peered at him in amazement.

"Really?" Marianne said. "That's interesting. I didn't know that." She reversed the magazine and tubed it in the other direction. "This probably seems inane to you guys, but they're going to ask us what name we want written on our doorplates today, and I don't know what to say. What are they going to think of a lawyer who can't even tell them her name?"

Ben couldn't imagine a suitable answer.

"Hey, can I join this conversation? I've stared at the rug for about as long as I can stand."

Ben turned and saw another of the new associates, a tall, good-looking man, perhaps a few years younger than

himself. His hair was dark, but his face had a bronze cast. He was wearing a blue suit, very similar to Ben's, with a white handkerchief in his breast pocket. He was carrying a white camel's hair overcoat.

His handshake was firm but not crippling. "I'm Greg Hillerman," he said. The other three associates introduced themselves.

"I don't remember coming across your name in my research," Alvin said. "Are you a TU graduate?"

Greg smiled a perfect smile. He had dimples on both cheeks. If the law didn't work out for him, Ben thought, he could get work as a male model, or perhaps a game-show host. "No, I went to law school at UT Austin. Undergrad at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque."

"Oh, an out-of-state hire," Alvin said. "That explains it."

"I did a year of undergraduate at UNM," Ben said.

"Really?" Greg smiled that marvelous smile again. "Frat man?"

"No. Well, not for long, anyway."

"You hang out with any frat guys?"

"Actually, I tried to have as little to do with that crowd as possible." Ben hoped he didn't sound rude. He didn't want to alienate the one relatively normal person he had met so far.

"Personally, I like *Marianne*," Greg said, shifting his attention to her.

Marianne's eyes brightened. "You think it sounds professional?" she asked.

"No, it reminds me of that good-looking wench on *Giligan's Island*. Man, I used to love her."

Marianne was not amused.

* * *

By 9:15, Ben had examined every detail of the Raven, Tucker & Tubb reception area with microscopic scrutiny. The lobby was decorated in a style that seemed both ornate and direct, the look of a firm that wanted to tell its clients it was both no-nonsense and expensive. Dark brown hardwood floors with rich burgundy accent rugs. A white wool sofa defining a continuous semicircle around the entire reception area. And in the center of it all, the bronze, human-size statue of Justice, a tall woman dressed in a toga and a blindfold, with her scales balanced in perfect equanimity.

"This really isn't how I envisioned spending my first day at work," Ben said, glancing again at his watch.

Greg arched an eyebrow. "You were expecting maybe tea and crumpets, with a personal address from Arthur Raven?"

"Not likely. Raven is in semiretirement," Alvin informed them. "Of counsel."

"Thank you for setting us straight, Alvin." Greg winked quickly at Ben.

"Do you know who your supervising attorney is, Alvin?" Ben asked.

"Yes. Thomas Seacrest."

"How did you find that out?"

"Well, I conducted an analysis of likely candidates, based upon the firm's historical distribution of assimilation assignments."

Ben took a deep breath. "Yes, but how did you find out?"

Alvin cocked his head slightly. "I asked the recruiting coordinator on thirty-nine."

Ben suppressed a smile. "Have you checked in with your supervisor?"

"Yes," Alvin said, leaning back against the sofa. "I got here early."

"Yeah, well, I didn't. I think I'll run upstairs for a moment and find out who mine is. Don't let them start without me."

"You got it, buddy." Alvin slapped Ben on the back as he rose. Whatta guy, Ben thought.

Ben walked to the elevator bank and pushed the UP button. He was relieved to be out of the reception area. Despite the apparent amiability, the tension in there was thicker than the statue of Justice. Eight overambitious cauldrons waiting to spew forth their juices and prove themselves. What a nightmare.

The elevator did not come. It seemed foolish to wait for an elevator just to go up one floor, especially when orientation might start at any moment. Ben opened a door to the right of the elevators. It was the stairwell. He climbed the flight of stairs leading to the thirty-ninth floor and tried to open the door.

The door wouldn't budge. It was locked from the outside. A sinking feeling crept through Ben's body. He ran up another flight of stairs and tried to open the door to the fortieth floor. The doorknob would not turn.

Ben began to panic. Somehow, he had known this would happen. He didn't know exactly when or exactly how, but deep down he had been certain he would make an utter and irredeemable fool of himself before his first day of work was over. He bolted up another flight of stairs. The door would not open.

His first instinct was to shout and pound on the door, but he checked the urge. What if someone came? Was this