

# Judgment Day

By Wanda Dyson

## Prologue

*Baltimore, Md*

Running away from home had sounded like the best idea ever when she was planning it, but now that sixteen-year-old Britney Abbott was tired, hungry, and out of money, it felt more like the biggest mistake of her life. She climbed down off the bus, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and wondered where she was going to sleep for the night.

If only her mother hadn't married that jerk. He was so strict. According to Ronnie, Britney couldn't date, couldn't stay over at a friend's for the night, and she had to be in the house no later than seven every evening. None of her friends had to live like that.

Last Saturday night her mom and Ronnie went out to dinner, leaving her home alone with the usual litany of instructions: You cannot have anyone over. You will do your homework. You will be in bed by ten. You will not spend the evening on the phone

with your friends. And you will not—I repeat not—leave this house; I am going to call and if you aren't here to answer the phone, you will be grounded for a month.

Fifteen minutes after they left, Ronnie-the-Predictable called. She answered the phone. An hour and a half later, she was gone.

She looked around at the crowds dispersing in several directions. The smell of diesel fuel overwhelmed her empty stomach and it growled in protest. Everything looked the way she felt—worn-out, dirty, and depressed.

“Hey, you okay?” A girl stood against the wall near the exit from the bus station. Torn jeans, pink T-shirt, high top sneakers, leather jacket, and numerous rings and studs from ear to nose to lip.

“Yeah, I'm cool.”

“You look hungry. I was just going over to Mickey D's. You wanna come?”

“No money.”

“It's okay. I think I can buy you a hamburger and some fries.”

Britney was hungry enough to be tempted and wary enough to wonder why the girl would make such an offer. “Me?”

“Yeah.” The girl walked over. “My name's Kathi. I came to Washington about five months ago. A friend of mine was supposed to be on the bus but either her parents caught her trying to run away or she changed her mind.”

“You're a runaway?”

Kathi laughed as she shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket. “Look around, girl. There are lots of us. We come to DC to get away. Some stay, some move on to Chicago or New York.”

Britney felt relieved to know she wasn't alone. "Okay. I'll take a hamburger. Thanks."

Kathi linked her arm in Britney's and led her down the street toward the Golden Arches. "What's your name?"

"Britney."

"Well, let's get you something to eat and then you can crash at my place."

They chatted as they ate their food and drank their sodas, and with each passing minute, Britney liked Kathi more. She might look a little tough, but Britney supposed that living on the streets, you had to be. Her appearance aside, Kathi seemed friendly and generous.

They were about a block past McDonald's when a woozy feeling interrupted their conversation. When she stumbled, Kathi steadied her. "You okay?"

"Just lightheaded."

"Tired more than likely. It's not far to my place."

But Britney's body felt heavier with each step. She struggled to stay awake. She had never felt this way before in her entire life. Not even after staying up for two straight days studying for a math test.

"I don't feel so good."

"We're almost there," Kathi told her. "Just down this way."

Britney didn't like the dark alley or the dark van parked there with the motor running, but she couldn't find the strength to resist Kathi's pull on her arm.

As they passed the van, the side door opened and a man stepped out. "Too bad she's such a looker."

“Yeah, well,” Kathi replied. “You get what I can find.”

The man picked up Britney and tossed her into the van. Britney tried to call out, tried to resist, but she could no longer control her arms or legs. She could only lay there and let the fear grow and build until the scream inside felt like an explosion in her head.

The man duct-taped her arms and legs. Then he placed a piece over her mouth. “Don’t worry, kid. This will be over real soon.”

## **Chapter 1**

### *Outside Washington DC*

Suzanne Kidwell shoved her tape recorder in the cop’s face, smiling up at him as if he were the hero in her own personal story. “We have two girls missing now and both were students at Longview High. Are you looking at the faculty and staff at the school?”

The officer puffed a bit, squaring his shoulders and thrusting out his chest as he hiked up his utility belt. “You have to understand that we haven’t finished our investigation, but I can tell you that we found pornography on the principal’s computer. I’d say we’re just hours away from arresting him.”

She lightly traced a glossy red nail down his forearm. "I knew I came to the right man. You have that air of authority and competence. And I'll bet you were the one who sent those detectives in the right direction, too."

He dropped his head in one of those "aw shucks, ma'am" moves. "Well, I did tell them that he had been arrested about ten years ago for assault."

"And they made a man like that the principal. What is this world coming to?" Before he could comment, she hit him with another. "Has he told you yet what he did with the girls?"

"Not yet. He's still insisting he's innocent, but it's just a matter of time before we get a confession out of him."

"Thank you so much, Officer. You're a hero. Those girls would be dead without you."

He blushed hard as she hurried off, lobbing him another dazzling smile as she calculated her timetable. It was nearly four and she had to be ready and on the air at six, scooping every other network in the city.

At the station, she ran up the stairs to the second floor and jogged down to Frank's office. "Is he in?" she asked his secretary.

"Sure. Go on in."

If there was a dark spot anywhere in her job at all, it was Frank Dawson. The man delighted in hassling her. Professional jealousy, no doubt. She knocked on his doorjamb. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Like Frank, the room was heavy on shine and light on substance. Awards and

diplomas covered all the walls. Pictures of Frank with politicians, presidents, and the wealthy, beautiful, and powerful were displayed prominently on all the bookshelves. His desk dominated the center of the room, covered in paperwork, tapes, and files.

“Sure.”

Suzanne took a deep breath, clutched her notes, and strode into his office. “You know the two local girls that went missing recently?”

He glanced up at the clock, a subtle reminder that she should be getting dressed and into makeup. “I think so.”

“Well, I’ve been doing some digging and they have a suspect.”

“And this is your business exactly why?”

“Because I scooped everyone else. I talked to one of the officers working the case and he told me that they have a suspect, they’re interrogating him now, and they expect to announce his arrest momentarily.”

“And what does this have to do with me?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “I want to go on the air with this late breaking news.”

He scratched his chin. “Your show is already scheduled, Suzanne. Corruption in the horse industry.”

“I know that, and I can still do that. I just need five minutes at the end of the show to cover this. We’ve got the scoop! How can we not run with it?”

Waving a hand, he said, “Fine. Go with it. I sure hope you have all the facts.”

“I have them straight from the mouth of the police. How much more do you want?”

“Fine. Do it.”

Grinning, she rushed back down to wardrobe and makeup in record time, entering the studio with mere minutes to spare.

Suzanne looked over at one of the assistants. “Where’s my microphone?”

As someone rushed to get her mic’ed up, the director walked in. “We have a job to do people; let’s get to it. We’re on the air in two.”

She straightened her jacket as the assistant adjusted the small microphone clipped to her lapel. “It’s fine. Move.”

The cameraman finished the countdown with his fingers. Three...two...one. She fixed her expression.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.” Suzanne turned slightly. “I’m Suzanne Kidwell. And this is Judgment Day.”

Suzanne took a deep breath while the station ran the introduction, taking a moment to straighten the notes in front of her and sip her water.

When the director pointed at her, she launched into the ongoing corruption and abuses endangering horse owners.

The camera shifted for a close-up. “And before I close tonight, I want to give you a late-breaking report. Just like you, I’ve been horrified by the tragic disappearance of teens here in the tri-state area. But what made me truly sit up and take notice was that within the last two weeks, two young girls—seventeen-year-old Jennifer Link, and sixteen-year-old Britney Abbott—were reported as runaways. Same neighborhood, same school, both runaways?”

**Comment [RHI1]:** Britney with one t or two? You have one t in the prologue, but two everywhere else, I think.

“Now maybe that could happen, but I was skeptical. I did some digging. And I’m

happy to report that the police have arrested Peter Fryer, the principal of Longview High School.”

Suzanne changed her expression from a touch of sorrow mixed with concern to outrage. “I spoke to the lead officer and he told me that evidence against the principal included child pornography on Fryer’s computer. In spite of being arrested ten years ago for assault, Peter Fryer was hired on as the principal of Longview just four years ago. He is still denying any involvement, but the police assured me they have their man. I will keep you posted.”

She angled her body. “As long as people out there that you trust are betraying that trust, they will face their Judgment Day with Suzanne Kidwell. Good night, America. I’ll see you next week.”

As soon as she got the signal that she was clear, she pulled off her mic and stood up, grabbing her water as left the studio.

She rushed down the hall and when she reached her office, she sank down into her chair and kicked off her shoes. She barely had time to curl her toes in the carpet before her phone rang.

She picked it up. “Great job, Suzanne.” It was Frank.

Comment [RH12]: Frank?

“Thanks, boss. I knew you’d be happy.”

“The phones are ringing off the hook. The other stations are scrambling to catch up to us.”

Smiling, she leaned back. “They’ll be eating our dust for a while now.”

“You’ll stay on this?”

“All the way to conviction.”