

A NOVEL

JUDGMENT DAY



WANDA L. DYSON

Praise for
Judgment Day

“High-octane straight from the start. With breakneck action, high-strung suspense and characters you can’t help but root for, *Judgment Day* is an irresistible read.”

—TOSCA LEE, author of *Demon: A Memoir*

“The Queen of High Octane Suspense has done it again! Wanda Dyson takes us on a roller-coaster ride worthy of a whiplash warning. High suspense, romantic tension, and even comic relief will keep you riveted and turning pages as fast as you can read. It’s all in there!”

—BONNIE S. CALHOUN, owner and publisher of *Christian Fiction Online Magazine*

“*Judgment Day* is packed with action and adventure. Private detective duo Marcus Crisp and Alexandria Fisher-Hawthorne are fascinating and keep the story rolling with their wit, sarcasm, and teamed-up tactical skills reminiscent of many favorite action-adventure movies. Dyson has penned a great suspense with strong Christian themes in *Judgment Day!*”

—RONIE KENDIG, author of *Dead Reckoning*
and *Nightshade*

“From page one I couldn’t put this book down. Suzanne is a highly flawed individual in the fight of her life. When she’s forced to call

in Alex and Marcus to unravel who's trying to frame her, they instead unravel an evil plot that ends with harvested organs. The pacing is tight, the characters people I want to know, and the plot so intricate I literally could not stop reading. Two thumbs up for those who love tightly written suspense with a very light twist of romance.”

—CARA C. PUTMAN, author of *Canteen Dreams*
and *A Promise Forged*

“*Judgment Day* is Dyson’s best suspense to date! The current event woven expertly into the fast-paced plot kept me turning the pages. For a fabulous, edge-of-your-seat, keep-you-up-late novel, *Judgment Day* is not to be missed!”

—ROBIN CAROLL, author of *Deliver Us from Evil*
and *Fear No Evil*

Also by Wanda Dyson

Fiction

Abduction

Obsession

Intimidation

Shepherd's Fall

Nonfiction

Why I Jumped, coauthored with Tina Zahn

A NOVEL

**JUDGEMENT
DAY**

WANDA DYSON



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JUDGMENT DAY

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*Shannon Marchese, Jennifer Peterson, Nicci Jordan Hubert, and
Jessica Barnes. This one's for you.*

*It was never about avoiding judgment day.
It was all about surviving it.*

—JOHN CONNOR in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*

Prologue

Friday, April 3. 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 lie 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.”

Wednesday, April 15. 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 question. “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 miked 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 closeup. “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 tristate 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?”

“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 there are people out there who betray our trust, there will be *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 mike and stood up, grabbing her water as she 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.

“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.”

2

Almost two weeks later—Tuesday, April 28

I heard the principal committed suicide.”

Suzanne looked briefly over at her boyfriend, Dr. Guy Man-
deville, and then back at the road. “He just couldn’t handle the
scrutiny.”

“So you’re finished with that story?”

“As far as I know, it’s over. They got their man, even if he did
take the coward’s way out. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you ask if I’m finished? Normally, you barely notice
the stories I’m working on.”

As Suzanne took her foot off the gas, the car suddenly acceler-
ated, shooting forward and throwing her back against the seat.
“Whoa!” She stomped on the brake and breathed a heavy sigh of
relief when the car responded.

Guy released his grip on the dashboard. “What was that?”

“That’s happened twice now this week. Just accelerating by itself.” She turned the wheel and pulled into the parking lot of her station. “It’s scaring the daylight out of me.”

“That’s dangerous, honey,” he replied as she eased into a parking space and shut the engine down.

“I just haven’t had time to get it checked out.”

Guy climbed out of the car and pulled out his car keys. “Take my car. I’ll drop yours off at Pete’s shop on my way home. I don’t want you driving this home tonight.”

She would have taken him up on that offer even if her car was working perfectly. The chance to drive his Porsche? No contest. Sidling up to him, she wrapped one arm around his neck and rewarded him with a kiss on the lips. “You realize that you may never get your car back.”

Toying with a lock of her blond hair, he just smiled. “Marry me and you can drive it anytime you want. Or better yet, I’ll buy one for you as an engagement present.”

Slipping her keys into his hand, she leaned into him. “I’m thinking about it. Seriously.”

“Then say yes.”

She sobered. “I just don’t know if I’m ready, Guy. There’s still so much I want to do before I settle down and get married.”

He stiffened slightly, obviously trying hard not to let his displeasure show. “You can be married and still chase your dreams.”

“Why the rush?”

“It doesn’t take me forever to know what I want.”

She glanced at her watch. "I have to go. We can talk about this later."

He wrapped his arms around her, letting his nose come down to touch hers. "I love you, Suzanne. I want to marry you and spoil you rotten. I want to give you everything you ever wanted."

"Except the time to decide what's best for me." She bit her lip as the words tumbled out. "I'm sorry."

He leaned in and kissed her tenderly. "Don't forget we have reservations for dinner at eight."

"Call me when you're ready and I'll pick you up." She ran a finger down his cheek. "It'll give me a little more time with the Porsche."



Guy stood and watched Suzanne until she disappeared inside the building. If only being his wife could be enough for her. He loved her passion for her work, but it was a double-edged sword.

With a glance over at his new Porsche gleaming in the afternoon sun, he folded himself into Suzanne's car and adjusted the seat to make room for his long legs, reset the radio to a classical station, and fastened the seat belt. His cell phone rang just as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Hi, Dad."



Willard Mandeville tucked the phone under his chin as he poured himself a drink. “Where are you? I just called the hospital and they told me you were out to lunch.”

“I’m on my way back now.”

He slammed the bottle of Scotch down on the counter. “You were with that woman again.”

“Dad, I’ve made my feelings clear on this. I love Suzanne and hope to marry her. You’re going to have to accept that.”

“She’s just after your money.” It sounded weak, but he was running out of arguments. He loved his son, but the boy could be as stubborn as his mother. *Man*. Guy was a well-respected surgeon, intelligent and ambitious. But a fool when it came to women. Suzanne Kidwell was interested for one reason only. To see what dirt she could dig up on the Mandeville family—and there was no way Willard was going to let her destroy their lives.

“If that were true, she’d already have a ring on her finger.”

“You proposed to her?” Willard sank down in the brown leather chair near the window, his mind scrambling for another argument against this woman.

“Yes. Several times.”

“Guy, this is a mistake. She’s an overly ambitious reporter who doesn’t care who she hurts. I guarantee you she’s going to do all she can to make us her next big story.”

“But that’s not the reason you called.”

“No.” Willard took a drink from his glass. “Your mother wanted me to ask if you could drop by this evening for dinner. She’s having Pierre make that beef dish you like so well.”

“I appreciate it, but I already have other plans.”

“Listen. Bring Suzanne for dinner. I know I haven’t been the most accommodating. The thought of a reporter in the family... well, it’s disconcerting, to say the least. But if you are determined to marry her, I’m going to respect your wishes.” *And with any luck, she’d be dead before she arrived.*

“I understand, but Suzanne can be trusted. Anyway, her car has been acting up—accelerating when it isn’t supposed to. I’m taking it over to Pete’s as soon as I’m done with this afternoon’s surgery. Suzanne is on the air until seven. There’s no way either of us can be there by five for dinner. And you know Mother hates to have dinner late.”

Willard dropped his glass. “You’re driving Suzanne’s car?”

“Yes, why?”

He ran a hand down his face as his heart began to race. “Well, if it’s acting up, are you sure that’s wise? Perhaps you should just pull over and call Pete. Have him send a tow truck to pick it up. You don’t want to get into an accident.”

“It’s okay. I’m just a few miles away.”

“Guy, listen to me. I have a bad feeling.”

“What else is new?” Guy laughed. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Guy—”

At that moment, the car jerked and then lurched forward. Guy dropped the cell phone and slammed his foot on the brake. It didn’t slow down. It didn’t stop. It went faster. He checked the sideview mirror and when he saw it was clear, jerked the wheel, changing lanes, barely avoiding the back of the SUV in front of him.

Cursing under his breath, he tried again to get the brakes to respond. His speed hit sixty. Then sixty-five. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear his father shouting his name, but he had no idea where his cell phone was. And until he got the car under control, he wasn't going to worry about it.

He kept pumping the brakes as the car continued to pick up speed. Seventy. Seventy-five. He whipped through traffic, weaving in and out, barely missing three car bumpers and a motorcycle. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He didn't bother to wipe it away. Eyes jumping from rearview mirror to side mirror to windshield, he fought to maneuver through the bridge traffic, desperately hoping to get to the other side so that he could drive the car into a ditch.

Eighty.

Eighty-five.

He approached the end of the bridge, nearly going airborne as he reached the small ledge where the pavements met.

He saw the red light ahead.

And the traffic stopped, waiting.

No option but to plow into the back of a line of cars. Until he remembered a nearby park.

He swerved to the right, hit the curb, bounced.

He saw the trees and aimed the car between two of them, hoping the grass would slow him down. Glancing at the speedometer, he realized he wasn't slowing enough.

The car was like a demon with a mind of its own and hellbent on destruction.

As he approached the opening between the two trees, he realized he'd miscalculated. He wasn't going to make it.

The thought was erased by a flash of memories. He tried to grab one and hold on to it, but they raced through his mind.

The front bumper scraped the tree and began to buckle. Releasing the wheel, he folded his arms over his head, trying to protect his face.

Suzanne.

The airbag exploded. His head snapped back.

The car whipped sideways into the other tree, then shot forward into a concrete monument and flipped.

Guy didn't feel the sensation of being airborne.

He didn't feel the impact when the car landed upside down.

He didn't feel the heat when it burst into flames.

