

FAT TUESDAY



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A Day After Tomorrow

SANDRA
BROWN

FAT
TUESDAY



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Chapter One

*H*e'll walk." Burke Basile extended the fingers of his right hand, then formed a tight fist. This flexing motion had recently become an involuntary habit. "There's not a chance in hell they'll convict."

Captain Douglas Patout, commander of Narcotics and Vice of the New Orleans Police Department, sighed discouragingly. "Maybe."

"Not 'maybe.' He'll walk," Burke repeated with resolve.

After a moment, Patout asked, "Why did Littrell assign this particular assistant to prosecute this case? He's a newcomer, been living down here only a few months, a transplant from up north. Wisconsin or someplace. He didn't understand the . . . the nuances of this trial."

Burke, who'd been staring out the window, turned back into the room. "Pinkie Duvall understood them well enough."

"That golden-tongued son of a bitch. He loves nothing better than to hammer the NOPD and make us all look incompetent."

Although it pained him to compliment the defense lawyer, Burke said, "You gotta hand it to him, Doug, his closing argu-

ment was brilliant. It was blatantly anti-cop, but just as blatantly pro-justice. All twelve jurors were creaming on every word." He checked his wristwatch. "They've been out thirty minutes. I predict another ten or so ought to do it."

"You really think it'll be that quick?"

"Yeah, I do." Burke took a seat in a scarred wooden arm-chair. "When you get right down to it, we never stood a prayer. No matter who in the D.A.'s office tried the case, or how much fancy legal footwork was done on either side, the sad fact remains that Wayne Bardo did not pull the trigger. He did not fire the bullet that killed Kev."

"I wish I had a nickel for every time Pinkie Duvall said that during the trial," Patout remarked sourly. "'My client did not fire the fatal bullet.' He chanted it like a monk."

"Unfortunately, it's the truth."

They'd tramped this ground at least ten thousand times—ruminating, speculating, but always returning to that one irreversible, unarguable, unpalatable certainty: The accused on trial, Wayne Bardo, technically had not shot to death Detective Sergeant Kevin Stuart.

Burke Basile wearily massaged his shadowed eye sockets, pushed back his unkempt wavy hair, smoothed down his mustache, then restlessly rubbed his palms against the tops of his thighs. He flexed the fingers of his right hand. Finally, he set his elbows on his knees and stared vacantly at the floor, his shoulders dejectedly hunched forward.

Patout observed him critically. "You look like hell. Why don't you go out and have a cigarette?"

Burke shook his head.

"Coffee? I'll go get it for you, bring it back so you don't have to face the media."

"No, but thanks."

Patout sat down in the chair next to Burke's. "Let's not write it off as a defeat yet. Juries are tricky. You think you've got some

bastard nailed, he leaves the courthouse a free man. You're practically assured an acquittal, they bring in a guilty verdict, and the judge opts for the maximum sentence. You never can tell."

"I can tell," Burke said with stubborn resignation. "Bardo will walk."

For a time, neither said anything to break the heavy silence. Then Patout said, "Today's the anniversary of the Constitution of Mexico."

Burke looked up. "Pardon?"

"The Mexican Constitution. It was adopted on February 5. I noticed it on my desk calendar this morning."

"Huh."

"Didn't say how many years ago. Couple of hundred, I guess."

"Huh."

That conversation exhausted, they fell silent again, each lost in his thoughts. Burke was trying to figure out how he was going to handle himself the first few seconds after the verdict was read.

From the start he'd known that there would be a trial. Pinkie Duvall wasn't about to plea-bargain what he considered to be a shoo-in acquittal for his client. Burke had also known what the outcome of the trial would be. Now that the moment of truth was—if his prediction proved correct—approaching, he geared himself up to combat the rage he knew he would experience when he watched Bardo leave the courthouse unscathed.

God help him from killing the bastard with his bare hands.

A large, noisy housefly, out of season and stoned on insecticide, had somehow found its way into this small room in the Orleans Parish courthouse, where countless other prosecutors and defendants had sweated anxiously while awaiting a jury's verdict. Desperate to escape, the fly was making suicidal little *pflats* against the windowpane. The poor dumb fly didn't know when he was beaten. He didn't realize he only looked a fool for his vain attempts, no matter how valiant they were.

Burke snuffled a self-deprecating laugh. Because he could identify with the futility of a housefly, he knew he'd hit rock bottom.

When the knock came, he and Patout glanced first at each other, then toward the door, which a bailiff opened. She poked her head inside. "They're back."

As they moved toward the door, Patout checked the time, murmuring, "Son of a gun. Ten minutes." He looked at Burke. "How'd you do that?"

But Burke wasn't listening. His concentration was focused on the open doors of the courtroom at the end of the corridor. Spectators and media streamed through the portal with the excitement of Romans at the Colosseum about to witness the spectacle of martyrs being devoured by lions.

Kevin Stuart, husband, father, damn good cop, and best friend, had been martyred. Like many martyrs throughout history, his death was the result of betrayal. Someone Kev trusted, someone who was supposed to be on his side, furthering his cause, backing him up, had turned traitor. Another cop had tipped the bad guys that the good guys were on the way.

One secret phone call from someone within the division, and Kevin Stuart's fate had been sealed. True, he'd been killed in the line of duty, but that didn't make him any less dead. He'd died needlessly. He'd died bloody. This trial was merely the mopping up. This trial was the costly and time-consuming exercise a civilized society went through to put a good face on letting a scumbag go free after ending the life of a fine man.

Jury selection had taken two weeks. From the outset, the prosecutor had been intimidated and outsmarted by the defense attorney, the flamboyant Pinkie Duvall, who had exercised all his preemptory challenges, handpicking a perfect jury for his client with hardly any argument from the opposition.

The trial itself had lasted only four days. But its brevity was

disproportionate to the interest in its outcome. There'd been no shortage of predictions.

The morning following the fatal incident, the chief of police was quoted as saying, "Every officer on the force feels the loss and is taking it personally. Kevin Stuart was well respected and well liked among his fellow policemen. We're using all the resources available to us to conduct a complete and thorough investigation into the shooting death of this distinguished officer."

"It should be an open-and-shut case," one pundit had editorialized in the *Times Picayune* the day the trial commenced. "An egregious mistake on the part of the NOPD has left one of its own dead. Tragic? Definitely. But justification to pin the blame on an innocent scapegoat? This writer thinks not."

"The D.A. is squandering taxpayers' money by forcing an innocent citizen to stand trial for a trumped-up charge, one designed to spare the New Orleans Police Department the public humiliation that it deserves over this incident. Voters would do well to take into account this farce when District Attorney Littrell comes up for reelection." This quote was from Pinkie Duvall, whose "innocent citizen" client, Wayne Bardo, né Bardeaux, had a list of prior arrests as long as the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway.

Pinkie Duvall's involvement in any court case guaranteed extensive media coverage. Everyone in public service, every elected official, wanted to hitch a ride on the bandwagon of free publicity and had used the Bardo trial as a forum for his or her particular platform, whatever that might be. Unsolicited opinions were as lavishly strewn about as colored beads during Mardi Gras.

By contrast, since the night of Kev Stuart's death, Lieutenant Burke Basile had maintained a stubborn, contemptuous silence. During the pretrial hearings, through all the motions filed with the court by both sides, amid the frenzied hype created by the media, nothing quotable had been attributed to the taciturn narcotics officer whose partner and best friend had died from a gunshot wound that night when a drug bust went awry.

Now, as he tried to reenter the courtroom to hear the verdict, in response to the reporter who shoved a microphone into his face and asked if he had anything to say, Burke Basile's succinct reply was, "Yeah. Fuck off."

Captain Patout, recognized by reporters as someone in authority, was detained as he tried to follow Burke into the courtroom. Patout's statements were considerably more diplomatic than those of his subordinate, but he stated unequivocally that Wayne Bardo was responsible for Stuart's death and that justice would be served only if the jury returned a guilty verdict.

Burke was already seated when Patout rejoined him. "This can't be easy for Nanci," he remarked as he sat down.

Kev Stuart's widow was seated in the same row as they, but across the center aisle. She was flanked by her parents. Leaning forward slightly, Burke caught her eye and gave her a nod of encouragement. Her return smile was weak, suggesting no more optimism than he felt.

Patout waved to her in greeting. "On the other hand, she's a trouper."

"Yeah, when her husband's gunned down in cold blood, you can count on Nanci to rise to the occasion."

Patout frowned at Basile's sarcasm. "That was an unnecessary crack. You know what I meant." Burke said nothing. After a moment, with forced casualness, Patout asked, "Will Barbara be here?"

"No."

"I thought she might come to lend you moral support if this doesn't go our way."

Burke didn't wish to expound on why his wife chose not to attend the proceedings. He said simply, "She told me to call her soon as I know."

Vastly different moods emanated from the camps of the opposing sides. Burke shared Patout's estimation that the assistant D.A. had done a poor job of prosecuting the case. After lamely

limping through it, he now was seated at his table, bouncing the eraser end of a pencil off a blank legal tablet on which was jotted not a single notation. He was nervously jiggling his left leg, and looking like he'd rather be doing just about anything else, including having a root canal.

While at the defense table, Bardo and Duvall seemed to be sharing a whispered joke. Both were chuckling behind their hands. Burke would be hard pressed to say which he loathed more—the career criminal or his equally criminal attorney.

When Duvall was distracted by an assistant from his office and turned away to scan a sheaf of legal documents, Bardo leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers beneath his chin, and gazed ceilingward. Burke seriously doubted the son of a bitch was praying.

As though he'd been beckoned by Burke's hard stare, Bardo turned his head. Connecting with Burke's gaze were flinty dark eyes, which he doubted had ever flickered with a twinge of conscience. Lizard-thin lips parted to form a chilling smile.

Then Bardo dropped one eyelid in a wink.

Burke would have come out of his chair and lunged toward Bardo if Patout, who'd witnessed the insolent gesture, hadn't grabbed Burke by the arm and restrained him.

"For chrissake, don't do something stupid." In a tense undertone he said, "Fly off the handle, and you'll be playing right into the hands of those bastards. You'll lend truth to every negative allegation they made about you during this trial. Now if that's what you want, go ahead."

Refusing to honor the reprimand even with a comeback, Burke yanked his arm free of his superior's grasp. Smug grin still in place, Bardo faced forward again. Seconds later, the court was called to order and the judge resumed the bench. In a voice as syrupy as the sap that dripped from summer honeysuckle, he admonished everyone to conduct himself in an orderly "maun-

nah” when the verdict was handed down, then he asked an aide to summon the jury.

Seven men and five women filed into the jury box. Seven men and five women had voted unanimously that Wayne Bardo was not guilty of the shooting death of Detective Sergeant Kevin Stuart.

It was what Burke Basile had expected, but it was harder to accept than he’d imagined, and he had imagined that it would be impossible.

Despite the judge’s instructions, spectators failed to restrain or conceal their reactions. Nanci Stuart uttered a sharp cry, then crumpled. Her parents shielded her from the lights of the video cameras and the rapacious reporters who swarmed her.

The judge thanked the jury and dismissed them; then, as soon as court was loudly and formally adjourned, the ineffectual prosecutor quickly stuffed his blank legal pad into his new-looking attaché case and walked up the center aisle as though it had just been announced that the building was on fire. He avoided making eye contact with Burke and Patout.

Burke mentally captioned the expression on his face: *It’s not my fault. You win some, you lose some. No matter what, the paycheck comes on Friday, so get over it.*

“Asshole,” Burke muttered.

Predictably, there was jubilation at the defense table and the judge had given up trying to control it. Pinkie Duvall was waxing eloquent into the media microphones. Wayne Bardo was shifting from one Bally loafer to the other, looking complacently bored as he shot his cuffs. His stone-studded cuff links glittered in the TV lights. Burke noted that his olive-complexioned forehead wasn’t even damp. The son of a bitch had known he had this rap licked, just as he’d beaten all the others.

Patout, acting as spokesman for the NOPD since the incident involved his division, was busy fending off reporters and their questions. Burke kept Bardo and Duvall in his sights as

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they triumphantly worked their way through the crowd of reporters toward the exit. They dodged no microphones or cameras. Indeed, Duvall cultivated and relished publicity, so he basked in the spotlight. Unlike the prosecutor, they were in no hurry to leave and in fact loitered to receive the accolades of supporters.

Nor did they avoid making eye contact with Burke Basile.

On the contrary, each slowed down when he reached the end of the row where Burke stood, right hand flexing and releasing at his side. Each made a point of looking Burke straight in the eye.

Wayne Bardo even went so far as to lean forward and whisper a hateful, but indefensible fact. "I didn't shoot that cop, Basile. *You* did."

Chapter Two

Remy?"

She turned and pushed a strand of hair from her forehead with the back of her gloved hand. "Hi. I wasn't expecting you."

Pinkie Duvall strode down the aisle of the greenhouse and took her in his arms, kissing her hard. "I won."

She returned his smile. "So I gathered."

"Another acquittal."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, but this one was hardly a challenge." His expansive grin belied his humility.

"A less brilliant lawyer would have been challenged."

Pleased by her praise, his grin widened. "I'm going to the office to make a few calls, but when I come back I'll be bringing the party with me. Roman had everyone on standby. In fact, I noticed the catering vans arriving when I came in."

Their butler, Roman, and the entire household staff had been on alert since the trial began. The parties Pinkie hosted to celebrate his legal victories contributed to his notoriety as much as

the flashy diamond ring he wore on the small finger of his right hand, from which he'd derived his nickname.

His post-trial bashes were as much anticipated as the trials themselves and were well documented in the media. Sometimes Remy suspected jurors of voting for an acquittal just so they could experience firsthand one of Pinkie Duvall's famous fetes.

"Is there anything I can do?" Of course there wasn't, and she knew that before asking.

"Just show up looking as gorgeous as always," he told her, sliding his hands down her back and giving her another kiss. After releasing her, he wiped at the smear of dirt on her forehead. "What are you doing out here, anyway? You know I don't like a lot of traffic in here."

"There hasn't been a lot of traffic. Only me. I brought a fern from the house because it didn't look healthy and I thought it could use some TLC. Don't worry, I didn't touch anything I shouldn't."

The greenhouse was Pinkie's domain. Horticulture was his hobby, but he took it seriously and was as much a stickler for neatness and precision in the greenhouse as in his law practice and in every other area of his life.

He took a moment now to survey proudly the rows of plants he had cultivated. Few of his friends, and even fewer of his enemies, knew that among Pinkie Duvall's other passions were his orchids, in which he specialized.

Extreme measures were taken to maintain the delicate balance of the environment inside the greenhouse. There was even a special enclosure within the greenhouse to house the equipment that monitored and controlled the climate. He'd done an exhaustive study of the topic and attended the World Orchid Congress every three years. He knew the precise light, humidity, and temperature conditions in which each particular group flourished. Cattleyas, laelias, cymbidiums, oncidiums—Pinkie nurtured them with the attention of a neonatal ICU nurse, pro-

viding each with proper potting, drainage, and aeration. In return, he expected his plants to be exemplary and extraordinary.

As though they didn't want to disappoint their master, they were.

Ordinarily. But now he frowned as he moved toward a grouping of plants labeled *Oncidium varicosum*. The stalks were heavy with blossoms, although they weren't as profuse as some of their neighbors'. "I've been pampering these nonas for weeks. What's the matter with them? This is a very poor showing."

"Maybe they haven't had time to—"

"They've had plenty of time."

"Sometimes when—"

"They're inferior plants. That's all there is to it." Pinkie calmly picked up one of the pots and dropped it to the floor. It broke upon impact with the stone tiles, creating a mess of fern root, shattered crockery, and bent pedicels. Another soon joined the first.

"Pinkie, don't!" Remy crouched down and cradled one of the tender plants in her hand.

"Leave it alone," he said with detachment, even as he sent another of the plants to its doom. He didn't spare a single one. Soon the entire group lay in shambles on the tiles. He stepped on one of the stalks and ground the blossoms beneath his heel. "They were ruining the appearance of the greenhouse."

Remy, upset over the waste, began scooping up the plants. Pinkie said, "Don't bother with that. I'll send one of the gardeners in to clean up."

He left with her promise that she would leave soon and start getting dressed for the party, but she didn't leave immediately. Instead, she stayed to sweep up the debris herself, being careful to put away everything she had used and leaving the greenhouse in pristine condition.

The pavestone path leading to the house meandered through the lawn. Carefully tended flower beds were sheltered by a can-

copy of moss-draped live oaks. The trees had been there for centuries before the house was built; the original building dated back to the early nineteenth century.

Remy entered through one of the back doors and took the rear stairs, avoiding the kitchen, butler's pantry, and dining room, where she could hear the caterer issuing terse orders to her corps of assistants. By the time Pinkie and his guests began arriving, everything would be ready, and the food and beverage service would be seamless.

Remy barely had allowed herself enough time to dress, but preparations had been made to speed up the process. A maid had already drawn her bath and was there awaiting further instructions. Together they discussed what Remy would wear and, after having laid everything out, the maid left her alone to bathe, which she did quickly, knowing that she would need extra time with her hair and makeup. Pinkie expected her to look her best for his parties.

Fifty minutes later, she was putting on the finishing touches at her vanity table when she heard him enter the master suite. "Is that you?"

"It sure as hell better not be anyone else."

Leaving her dressing room, she joined him in the bedroom and thanked him when he whistled appreciatively. "Can I fix you a drink?"

"Please." He began removing his clothes.

By the time she'd poured him a scotch, he was down to his skin. At fifty-five, Pinkie was impressively fit. He kept his body hard and compact with rigorous daily workouts and deep muscle massages by a masseur he kept on retainer. He was proud of the physique he'd maintained despite his fondness for exceptional wines and New Orleans' notable cuisine, including its famous desserts like bread pudding with whiskey sauce and creamy pralines chock-full of pecans.

Kissing Remy's cheek, he took the highball glass she offered